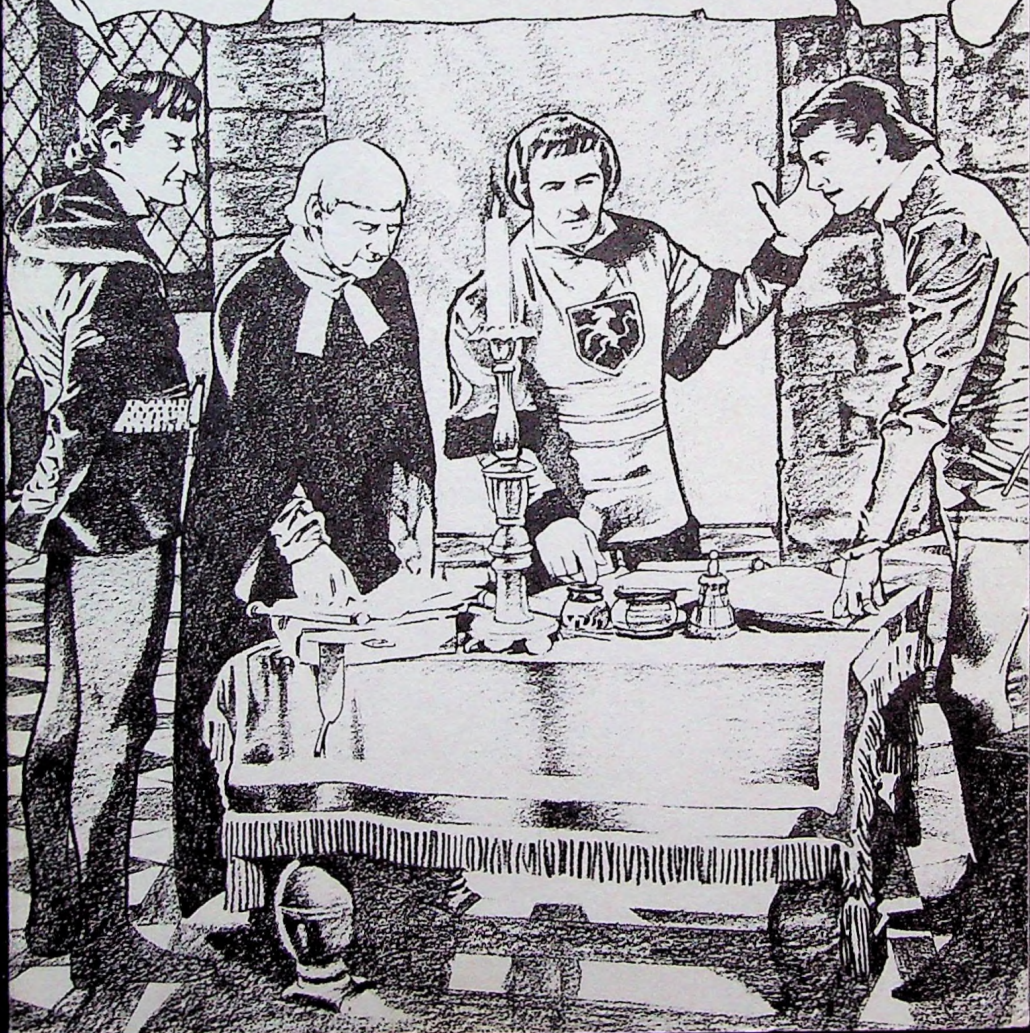
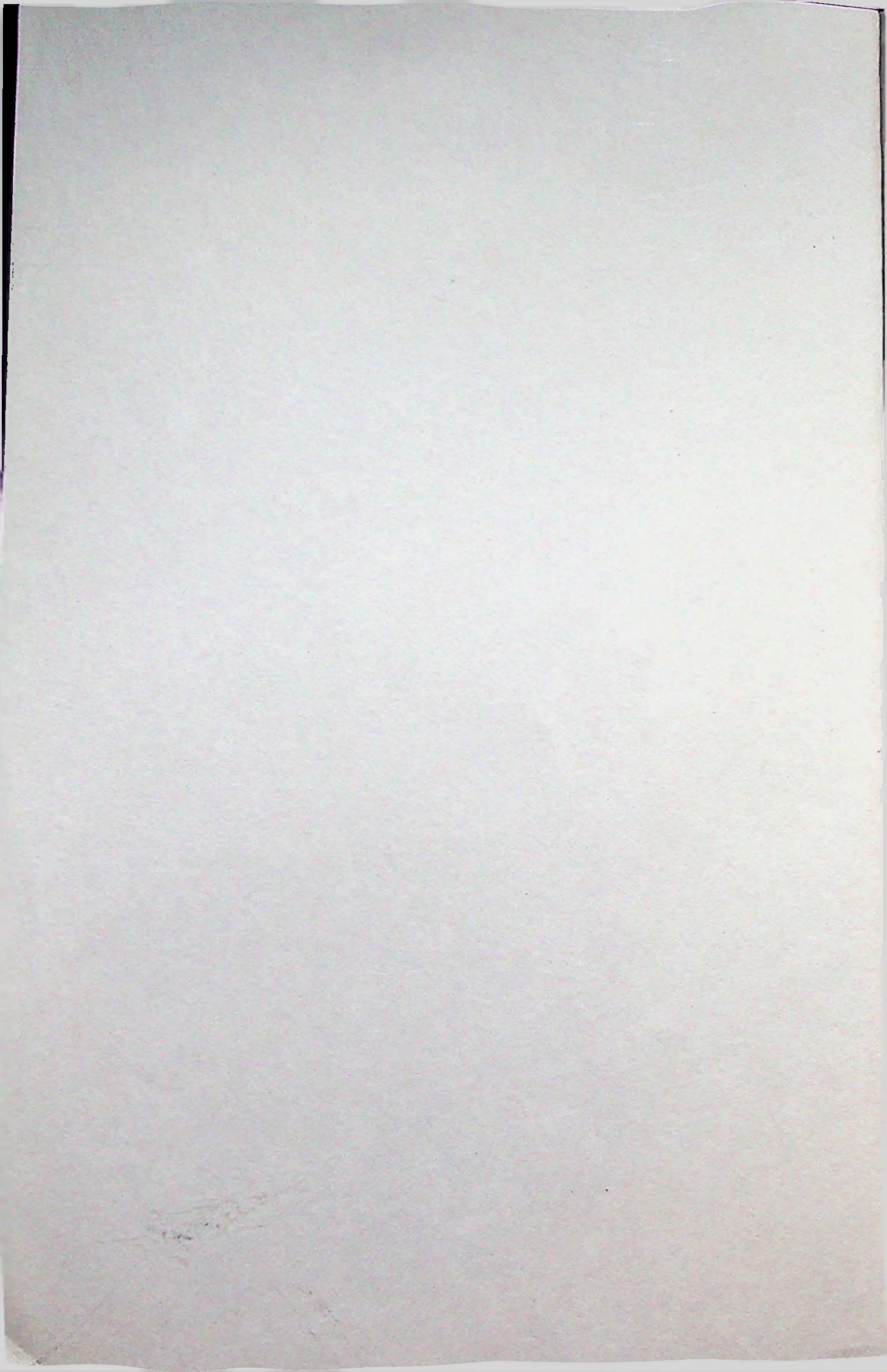


AMBERZINE

Issue #10 • October • 1997 • Ten Dollars







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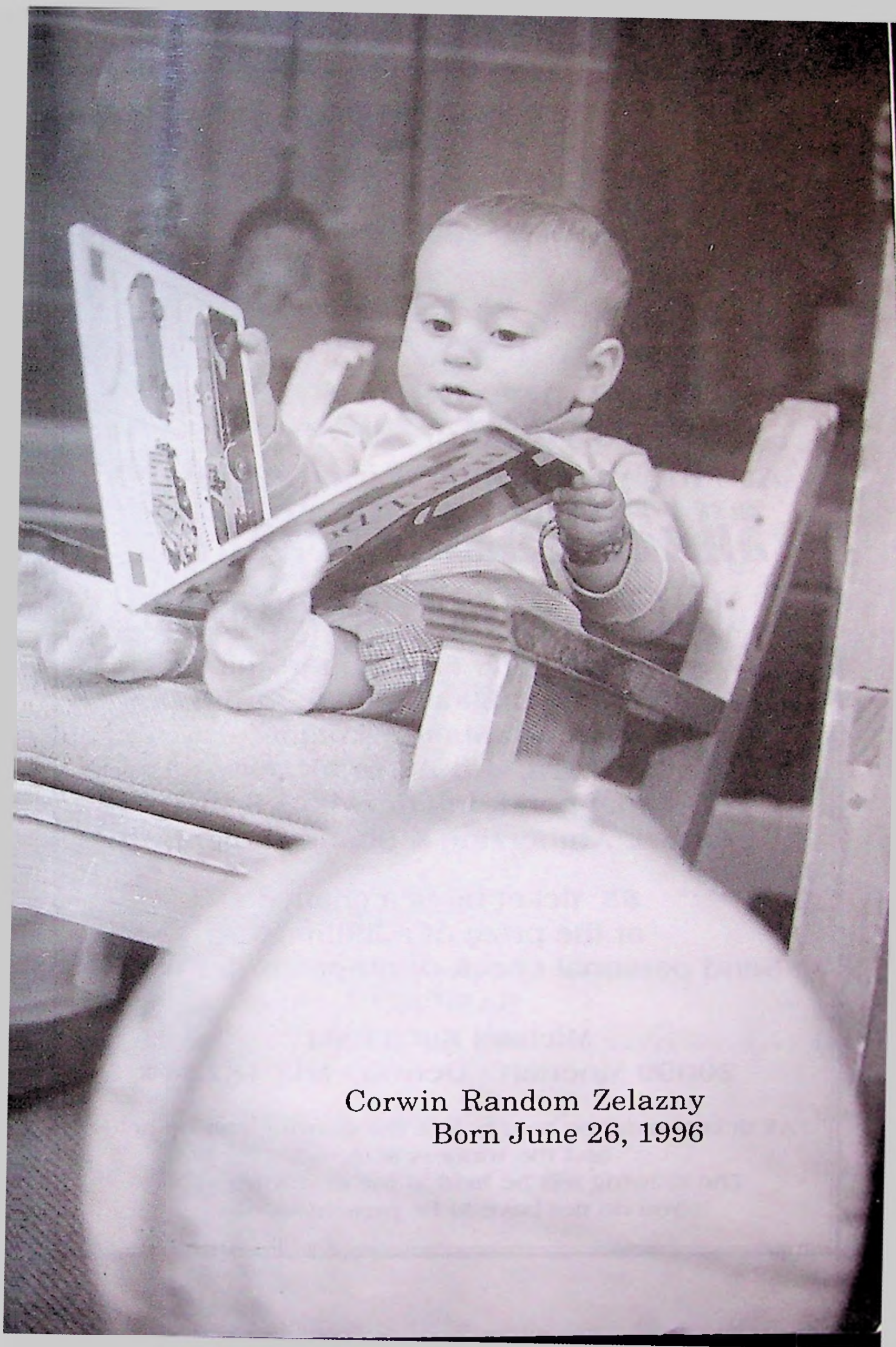
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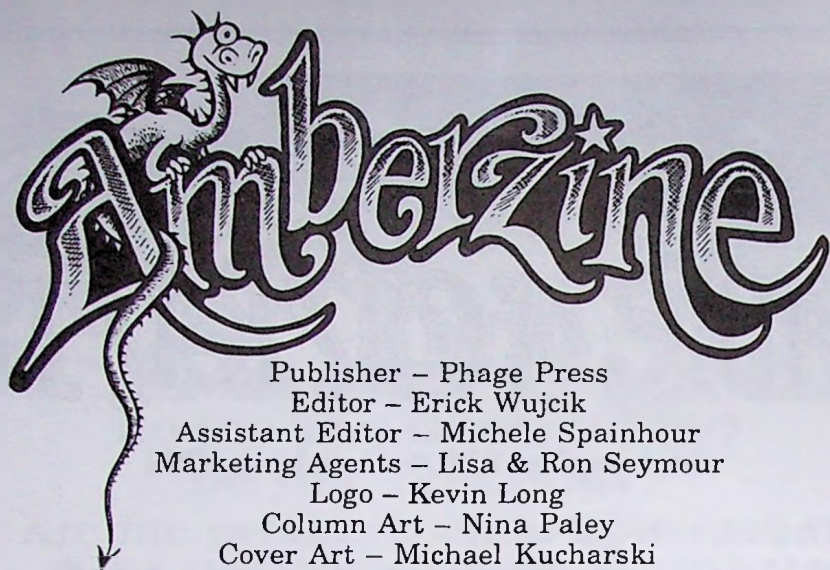
Table of Contents

Amberzine #10  October, 1997

News & Editorial Stuff	5
Amber On-Line	7
Poems of Fire by Chuck Knakal	10
Warrior's Knowledge	13
Jane Lindskold.	
Coming to a Cord	18
The Third Amber Short Story by Roger Zelazny	
Shadow Knight	28
Ken Alves	
Written in Blood: Kajina's Tale	41
Shai Strouse	
Random Chance: Beck's Diary	68
Martin Sutherland	
Shards of My Mind	127
Catherine R. Klessig	
Blood and Shadow	152
John J. Wick	
Dance, from <i>To Spin is Miracle Cat</i>	159
Roger Zelazny	
Notes from the Lord of Chaos	160
Kevin Lowry	



Corwin Random Zelazny
Born June 26, 1996



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Zelazny's First Grandchild is Born.

Roger Zelazny's first grandchild was born last summer.

Corwin Random Zelazny was the name chosen by Trent Zelazny, Roger's second son, and Trent's wife Caitlin.

Thanks to Savanna Spirit for her photographs of the family (on this page), and of Corwin (frontispiece).

On a personal note, I've had a couple of really good laughs, listening on the telephone to a mother's voice saying "Corwin! Stop that!"

Zelazny Memorial Issue Canceled.

Even two years later, it's just too close. Too painful.

Only a few managed to submit items for the Zelazny "Memorial" issue.

It would seem to be for the best. None of us really want to accept that Roger is gone from our lives.

So it's official. There will be no special issue.

Instead, starting in the next issue we'll be publishing occasional pieces dedicated to Roger Zelazny, starting with a description of Roger's role-playing experiences by Walter Jon Williams.

Upcoming Plans for Amberzine.

Our regular features, including "letters" and "Classified Advertising" will return next issue, so be sure to send in your questions and letters soon. It's also a good time for other submissions.



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What's on Palladium's Website? www.palladiumbooks.com

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- The latest information and industry Press Releases.
- Answers to frequently asked questions.
- Questions and answers of all kinds.
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Rifts® World Book 14: New West™:
224 pages, \$20.95, available now.

Rifts® World Book 15: Spirit West™:
224 pages, \$20.95, June.

Rifts® Sourcebook 4: Coalition Navy:
120 pages, \$12.95, June/July

Rifts® World Book 16: Federation of Magic™: July 1997.

Rifts® World Book 12: Pyscape™: August or September release.

Other Palladium RPGs for 1997

Heroes Unlimited™, Second Edition:
July/August

Scryppers — for Heroes Unlimited™ and Rifts®: Fall 1997

Palladium Fantasy RPG, 2nd Ed.: Old Kingdom Mountains: Summer/Fall

Palladium Fantasy RPG, 2nd Ed.: Old Kingdom Lowlands: Fall 1997

RECON® Modern Combat: Fall 1997 or early 1998.

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AMBER ON-LINE



Wow!

Color! Sound! Cool Graphics! Trumps Galore!

So many original ideas, unique campaigns, cool quotes, game logs and diaries, that the whole phenomenon defies description. Not to mention FTP sites, Telnet sites and mailing lists. Let's just say that, as of today, September 19th, 1997, it's easy to waste hundreds of hours of connect time just jumping from one page of links to the next.

In other words, Amber is booming on the internet.

Attempting to catalog this treasure trove here in the pages of *Amberzine* would be silly! It takes a resource with the power of the whole internet just to keep track of the Logrus-spawned activity.

For those of you who are strangers to this new world, I urge you to set aside a few hours to start exploring.

No money? No computer system? No internet connection?

That needn't be an obstacle. Throughout the United States public libraries (not to mention university libraries) are installing public internet terminals at a breakneck pace.

[By the way, a tip of the editorial hat to none other than Bill Gates, who personally donated a half million bucks to the computer resources of my favorite haunt, the main branch of the Detroit Public Library.]

Once you're on-line, it's time to start searching.

Tip: click on Netscape's "Internet Search" button, and enter "Amber Diceless." That's all it takes to start linking up with hundreds of enthusiastic Amber role-players.

What follows is just a small sampling of the wonders to be found... Just be warned that the internet seems to have a bad case of uncontrolled Shape Shifting—any specific location addresses are subject to arbitrary change.

Golden Circle/Shadow Walk

As of today "The Golden Circle" has links to 62 different websites related to *Amber Diceless Role-Playing*, Roger Zelazny, or related topics. Once you get to any one site, you can hop to another one by clicking on the "Shadow Walk" button.

<http://www.webring.org/cgi-bin/webring?ring=golden;list>

<http://www.geocities.com/Area51/9411/Circle.htm>

On-Line and e-mail Amber Campaigns

Hard to pick out just one site, but this one is very up to date (as of this writing), and covers buckets of nifty links. Plus, I liked the gonzo title.

The Happy Little Amberite's Amber Page

<http://www.geocities.com/Area51/9411/>

Ambercon Information On-Line

As Ambercons spring up like mushrooms, all over the world, their electronic shadows keep getting stronger and more vivid.

Ambercon North

<http://www.angelre.com/ca/acn/>

AmberCon UK

<http://www.reading.ac.uk/~ssu96sp/ambercon.html>

Clan Amber (Scotland)

<http://www.netcomuk.co.uk/~dmurray1/amber-index.html>

Mailing Lists

No discussion of on-line Amber would be complete without a mention of the "Amber Mailing List," historically the most active and influential forum for discussion of all things Amber. To become a member of the list (which means that you will start getting voluminous "mail" from the list to your e-mail account), just send an e-mail, with the text "subscribe

amber," to "majordomo@logrus.org." Or just check out one of the following websites.

Amber Mailing List

<http://people.delphi.com/matociquala/amberfaq.html>

Courts of Chaos Mailing List

<http://a-ztech.com/mabarry/chaos/index.html>

Amberfic (Amber fiction) Mailing List

No website (yet!), but you can subscribe with an e-mail to:

"majordomo@io.com" with "subscribe amberfic (followed by your e-mail address)"

AmberMUSH

Yet another universe of Amber playing possibilities. From the introduction to the site, "...run like the wind, lest you be trapped like we..." Probably good advice.

<http://www.amber.godlike.com/>

Phage Press On-Line

We don't have an official website yet, but it won't be long before we make the big leap into the surf. For the time being, Casey Bowen has kindly provided us with an "unofficial" site. We also have a pair of e-mail addresses (so we aren't completely out of touch).

Phage Press (Informal)

<http://www.enol.com/~ferenczy/phage.html>

Phage Press E-Mail Address (Lisa Seymour)

lisa.phage@juno.com

Phage Press E-Mail Address (Erick Wujcik)

ewujcik@mailexcite.com

Roger Zelazny Websites

Finally, to wrap up all things on-line, here are a quartet of websites devoted to Roger Zelazny.

Norris Thomlinson's Roger Zelazny Page:

<http://wsrv.clas.virginia.edu/~npt4g/zelazny/zelazny.html>

Zelazny & Amber:

<http://www.ghgcorp.com/it/scott/zelazny/>

The Creator:

<http://www.ghostwheel.com/roger/>

Roger Zelazny Web Sites and More

<http://www.enol.com/~ferenczy/rogerz.html>

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Courts of Chaos Mailing List

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Amberfic (Amber fiction) Mailing List

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Phage Press E-Mail Address (Lisa Seymour)

lisa.phage@juno.com

Phage Press E-Mail Address (Erick Wujcik)

ewujcik@mailexcite.com

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The Creator:

<http://www.ghostwheel.com/roger/>

Roger Zelazny Web Sites and More

<http://www.enol.com/~ferenczy/rogerz.html>



Nuance & Pattern Control

We know that those with power over Pattern have the ability to consciously manipulate Shadow.

No surprise there.

However, is it possible that a player's subconscious will add nuances to Pattern manipulation?

Might not those with Advanced Pattern have unconscious hidden desires that influence the Pattern in ways unknown?

Players may unknowingly introduce some unknown elements into their Pattern manipulation; their warped value system could be imposed on the Shadow they are manipulating.

Aside from being helpful in educating aggressive players, I like to think of it as a way of instantaneously paying off "Bad Stuff..."

Picture Joe. A bit cocky, as well as more than a little paranoid. Add Advanced Pattern, and a little Bad Stuff, and you end up with an explosive combination.

GM: So where are you going?

Joe: I'll use Pattern to take the three of us to a pre-nuclear earth-type shadow.

GM: Is that it?

Joe: Hmm. I want a cafe with good food and lodging in a medium size European city.

GM: No problem. You easily spot one among the thousands to select from.

Joe: Also, I want there to be strong Trump and Logrus barriers on the entire place.

GM: That's not quite so common. Are you searching for something that's already barred?

Joe: No. I've got a better idea. I'll just take us to a place where the Shadow is easy for me to manipulate. That way I can put up barriers when we get there.

GM: Okay, no problem.

Joe: Great. When we arrive, I want to modify the entire shadow.

GM: Not a problem. You picked a Shadow that is very receptive to your will.

Joe: Just what I wanted. I impose my will, and make it difficult to enter or leave. Trump, Logrus, and magic will all be suppressed.

GM: How effective do you want to make this "suppression?"

Joe: It will be difficult for anyone to enter and to leave, even for me.

At this point the other players might discover that magic is non-existent and that it is difficult to use or fabricate Trump.

Typically, Joe reassures the other players everything is under control...

This sets the stage for the Game Master. Sooner or later, when Joe is ready to leave the Shadow,

something like the following might happen...

GM: Okay, the whole group is gathered in the restaurant. What are you doing?

Joe: As soon as we get done eating, I'm planning on using the Pattern to...

GM: Hang on. Before you get to that point, just before dessert, two men in green uniforms approach your table. The older one addresses you, asking to see your papers.

Joe: What kind of uniform are they wearing?

GM: You don't know, but the color reminds you of the uniform worn by immigration officers in your home Shadow. The man insists you produce travel papers and identification immediately. You notice that several other uniformed men have entered the restaurant.

Joe: I'll explain that our papers are in our room...

At this point the other players will likely discover that powers like Trump, Logrus, magic, and even Pattern, are useless.

GM: The officials tell you that your rooms have already been searched and that if you don't produce your papers immediately, you will be arrested.

Joe: Can't I just find the right papers in my pocket?

GM: Oddly enough, you can't. Several of the uniformed men are pulling out large revolvers. What are you doing?

Joe: I'll stand up. (in character) Is this how you treat visitors to your city?

GM: One of the men quickly applies a leaded weight to the rear of Joe's skull. He drops like a rock.

To make a long story short, our adventurers will probably wind up being separated, strip searched, locked up and interrogated (or worse if they resist). Joe's barriers will render most player characters helpless.

Joe ends up on the receiving end of an intensive non-stop interrogation, with beatings, electroshock, and an assortment of drugs. Each will dull the character's concentration.

The chance of using Pattern under these circumstances is pretty much hopeless.

Why is this happening?

Remember what Joe said?

"...It will be difficult for anyone to enter and to leave, even for me..."

Yes, that could mean that the Shadow is simply resistant to Pattern manipulation, but a Shadow's "defenses" or "barriers" can take many forms.

In this case, since Joe's unconscious "knows" how he could escape, it also "knows" how the Shadow must protect itself, and "knows" that the Shadow must remain unchanged.

Bottom line, it is not the Advanced Pattern Mastery that generated Joe's predicament. Those who shift Shadow, especially those with Bad Stuff, will always be at risk.

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Warrior's Knowledge

by Jane M. Lindskold

"Write about what you know" is one of those standard bits of wisdom handed out in fiction writing workshops that troubles anyone who writes science fiction or fantasy. A writer of police procedurals or mysteries can visit the local police station. A romance writer can draw upon personal experience or the experiences of friends. However, an SF writer can't just trot over to the local starport and sign up for piloting lessons. A Fantasy writer can't join the local Wizards Guild and study a few spells.

This isn't meant to be an excuse for lazy writing. More bad SF and Fantasy has been written by writers who don't bother to learn how the "real" elements of their setting works. Thus, in SF we have stories laden with improbable planetary ecologies, aliens that are just humans in furred or scaled suits, and other such abuses. In Fantasy we have horses that are treated more like hairy automobiles, and sword fights that make real fencers sigh in despair and wish they

could challenge the author to a few rounds.

No one was ever likely to challenge Roger Zelazny to one of those duels. He may have had his share of human-like aliens and gonzo spells, but when it came to fight scenes, his details satisfied all but the pickiest that he knew what he was talking about. As a student of both armed and unarmed combat, Roger brought his knowledge to his writing.

Roger's formal study of martial arts began with fencing and judo when he was an undergraduate. A slim, very shy young man who wanted to be a poet, he did not seem like the type to be drawn to fighting arts of any sort.

However, Western Reserve (now Case Western Reserve) required four semesters of physical education. Roger "couldn't stand" team sports, so he tried fencing and found that because of its emphasis on individual performance it strongly appealed to him. The coach convinced him to try out for the fencing team. He did so, earning three varsity

letters and captaining the épée squad during his last two years.

Practical knowledge of fencing colored Roger's writing long after he had given up sword-play as anything more than an occasional hobby. Whenever characters in a Zelazny story pick up bladed weapons, the reader can be assured that Roger has considered the real limitations of the weapons and their wielders. Moreover, he also adapted techniques to suit those of his characters who differ from ordinary mortals: "All of the lengthier duelling sequences in the Amber books are properly choreographed for a rapier class weapon, rather on the heavy side, as the Amberites have the extra strength to wield such a blade well."¹

Although Roger did not pursue fencing in any concentrated fashion after college, he remained interested in sword techniques. When Dalt battles the Pattern Ghost of Eric in *Prince of Chaos*, Merlin's narration of the action reveals that the swordsmen use techniques borrowed from both Japanese and European traditions. Initially, Dalt's style is the more heavily influenced by Japanese traditions; later Eric employs some Japanese

techniques himself. Since no similar details surface in the first five of the *Chronicles* (yet Eric has died fairly early in the course of events and his ghost hasn't had the opportunity to learn more) obviously the alteration is not in the Amberites, but in the author.

Unarmed combat was an even greater influence on how Roger presented combat. He studied judo for two years in college. His instructor, Bill Gavel, was a former Marines unarmed combat instructor who included practical fighting techniques "involving crushing larynxes, breaking necks and spines"² along with the sport aspects. Gavel did not offer belt tests, so Roger was not ranked at this time, but after graduating with his Master's in English from Columbia he took up judo again. He stopped after he had been ranked with a green belt.

During his military service, Roger studied karate, but again he was not ranked.

The martial art that Roger studied most seriously was aikido—a martial art that, unlike karate and judo, is usually termed a "defensive" art. Roger began studying aikido in 1982 and continued until shortly before his death. Although aikido does not use

weapons, it does bear similarities to fencing. Roger explained as follows:

Morihei Uyeshiba, the founder of Aikido, created the art by combining Daitoryu Aikijutsu (a form of jujitsu) techniques w/ the footwork for the Shinkage (Shadow-sword) school of swordmanship- i.e., in many of the techniques the attacking arm is captured in an Aikijitsu grip & then treated as if it were a sword, the cutting movement then performed resulting in the execution of the throw.³

Roger studied aikido from white belt through black. The art influenced him in ways other than providing him with a bunch of neat physical tricks. The teacher he studied under longest was Phil Cleverley. Phil's style was a soft one that eschewed jerks, grabs, and pulls in favor of techniques that used the force of the attack against the attacker. The longer Roger studied with Phil, the more he realized that he was not only being asked to re-evaluate how he dealt with physical assault, but also how he dealt with any form of attack. Instead of rejecting the attack and the attacker, aikido embraces them. This was a new way of thinking for Zelazny, who, like many shy people, had been more

prepared to reject rather than embrace.

In order to better participate as a *uke* ("attacker") during aikido practice, Roger studied tae kwon do. He chose his teacher, Michael Robinson, because Robinson could also teach him the basic elements of hapkido. Hapkido is related to aikido by way of aikijitsu but is, in Roger's words, "much nastier." Roger only studied tae kwon do for about seven months. Shortly after his yellow belt test, he suffered a peculiar injury to the sole of his foot and so dropped out. However, learning this new art re-enforced his belief that knowledge of many forms is more effective than specialization in one. Doubtless, this is why so many of his characters are combat generalists.

When Phil Cleverley moved from Santa Fe to Albuquerque, he asked Roger to teach his course for him at least part-time. At first Roger resisted, but he found that teaching was the last element he needed to improve his own skill:

Explaining something you know only at a reflex level does require a sort of intellectualization I'd never run those things through

in the past. I discovered it to be almost identical to my earliest experiences in teaching at writing conferences and seminars.⁴

For those who want more details on this particular subject, Roger's "Introduction" to the anthology *Warriors of Blood and Dream* (which he edited), contains a thoughtful and unusually personal reflection on how the martial arts, but most especially aikido, shaped his ways of reacting to the universe.

Roger always credited a conversation with fellow writer and martial artist Walter Jon Williams with awakening a desire to find a martial art which he could practice without a partner to serve as the *uke*. Phil Cleverley suggested that he try t'ai chi and so Roger signed up with Wasantha Young to learn the Yang style, short form. T'ai chi continued to interest him, even though he ended his lessons after two years.

As noted above, what Zelazny was doing in his own life was often reflected in what he wrote. In the early story "A Rose For Ecclesiastes" Gallinger uses jujitsu to defeat his opponent Ontro, the Fist of Malann. The nameless

protagonist in the stories collected as *I Am Legion* uses judo moves in two of the three stories (knowing judo does not make the protagonist invincible, however; neither of these attacks are completely successful). In the early Amber novels, swordplay is an essential part of the way the Amberites resolve their difficulties. Indeed, one of the first things that Corwin retrieves upon his return to Amber is his sword.

As Roger's interest in the martial arts became both broader and more detailed, the techniques used by his characters also changed. This is not to say that the swashbuckling glory that typified Corwin's adventures (and those of Jack of Shadows and Dilvish the Damned) vanished. It just acquired new tools.

Corwin's son, Merlin, isn't crazy about swords at all. This isn't due to lack of training, but to personal inclination. When in *Knight of Shadows* Merlin is assaulted by a doppelganger on the Pattern, he uses an aikido technique to defeat it rather than a sword. Like another Zelazny character, Tom Gurden in *The Mask of Loki* (written with Thomas T. Thomas), Merlin prefers the

indirect method of dealing with problems. Neither of these men are pushovers but, like the art they study, they have chosen a Way that embraces the attacker and the attack rather than rejecting it. Perhaps Merlin, with a psyche that has been magically constrained by Dara and Mandor, could *not* become an expert in an aggressive "attack" art, but his Amberite's sense of self-preservation finds its outlet in aikido.

Another fascinating possibility is that as Zelazny himself learned to embrace rather than reject the attacker and the attack, he began creating characters who would also embrace rather than reject. In the first five *Chronicles*, Corwin meets with each of his siblings, but his only real ally is Random—and Random is hardly a threat to him. Merlin, although an only child, has his own group of generational peers. *Trumps of Doom* ends with Luke trapping Merlin, but by the end of the series the two young men are close friends.

Indeed, Merlin ends up with a group of allies who support him. The Ghostwheel develops a healthy relationship with his "parent"—even though it

initially resented being created as nothing more than an elaborate tool. Even Dalt (who Merlin threatened at their first meeting by digging his grave) becomes an ally of sorts. When Corwin disappears, no one seems to notice or particularly care. One cannot believe that the same indifference would govern if Merlin was to vanish.

So Zelazny's studies of the martial arts may have had more than the obvious influence on his stories. Certainly, they effected how he presented combat, but as martial arts expanded what he knew about interpersonal relationships, like any good writer, he wrote about what he knew.

¹ Letter to the author 24 February, 1989.

² "Introduction," *Warriors of Blood and Dream*. Edited by Roger Zelazny, 1995.

³ Letter to the author, 6 August 1989.

⁴ Letter to the author, 21 March 1989.



Coming to a Cord

by Roger Zelazny

It is no fun being tied to a bedpost when you are feeling under the weather. I phased back and forth between visibility and invisibility uncontrollably. On the other wrist, I felt my ability to communicate beginning to return. My increased sentience had remained with me ever since my strange journey with Merlin in the place between shadows. But there was a shock on my return to this reality. Slowly now, I was recovering from it, though some of the symptoms were slower in going than others. Consequently, it took me much longer than it normally would have to unknot myself.

I am Frakir, strangling cord to Merlin—Lord of Amber and Prince of Chaos. Normally, too, he would never have abandoned me like this, in the blasted apartment of Brand, late Prince of Amber and would-be Lord of the Universe. But he was under a mild spell Brand had actually left about for his son Rinaldo. However, Merlin has such a strong affinity with Rinaldo—also known as Luke—by virtue of their long association, that the spell latched onto him. He must have shaken it by now, but that still left me in an awkward position, with him doubtless back in the Courts.

I did not feel like waiting around with all the rebuilding and redecorating going on. They could decide to chuck the bed, with me attached, and go for all new stuff.

I finished unknotting myself. At least, Merlin had used no magic when he'd tied me there. On the other hand, it was a tight knot, and I squirmed for a long while to get myself unlooped. Finally, the thing was loosened and I was able to undo it. Once I had freed myself from its subtle geometries, I slithered down the bedpost to the ground. At least this left me in a position to slip away, should a gang of furniture movers suddenly appear. In fact, it suddenly seemed a good idea to get out of the fast traffic lane now.

I moved away from the bed—out of Brand's room and into Merlin's—wondering what had been the secret of that ring he'd found and put on—the spikard thing.

That it was extremely powerful and drew its energies from many sources was obvious to a being such as myself. That it seemed a thing of the same order as the sword Werewindle was also readily apparent, despite their varied forms to the eye of a human. Suddenly, it occurred to me that Merlin might not notice this, and I began to think that it might be necessary he should.

I crossed his room. I can move like a snake when I would. I have no ability to transport myself magically like almost everyone else I know, so I figured it were best to find someone who did. My only problem was that, in keeping with the family's general policy of personal secrecy on everything from magic to soufflé recipes, many of them did not even know I existed.

...And for that matter I didn't know the location of their apartments, save for Merlin's, Brand's, Random and Vialle's, and Martin's—which Merlin sometime visited. Random and Vialle's would be hard to reach, with all the work that was going on. So I headed off in the direction of Martin's rooms and slithered under the door when I got there. He had rock posters on most of the walls, as well as the speakers for a magically powered CD player. He, alas, was absent, and I had no idea when he might return.

I went back out into the hall and slithered along it, listening for a familiar voice, checking under doors, into rooms. This went on for some time before I heard Flora say, "Oh, bother!" from behind a door up the hall. I headed in that direction. She was one of the ones privy to my existence.

Her door was closed, but I was able to make my way beneath it into a highly decorated sitting room. She seemed in the process of mending a broken fingernail with some sort of goo.

I crossed the room to her side, maintaining my invisibility, and wrapped myself about her right ankle.

Hello, I said. This is Frakir, Merlin's friend and strangling cord. Can you help me?

Following a moment of silence, she said, "Frakir! What's happened? What do you need?"

I was inadvertently abandoned, I explained, while Merlin was under the influence of a peculiar spell. I need to get in touch with him. I've realized something he may need to know. Also, I want to get back on his wrist.

"I'll give his Trump a try," she said, "though if he's in the Courts I'll probably not be able to reach him."

I heard her open a drawer, and moments later I heard her fumbling with cards. I tried to tune in on her thoughts as she manipulated them, but I could not.

"Sorry," she said, after a time. "I can't seem to get through to him."

Thank for trying, I told her.

"When did you get separated from Merlin?" she asked.

It was the day the Powers met in the back hall, I said.

"What sort of spell did Merlin get caught up in?"

On that was hanging fairly free in Brand's quarters. You see, Merlin's and Brand's room being next door to each other, he'd entered out of curiosity when the wall fell during the confrontation.

"Frakir, I don't think that was an accident," she said. "One Power or the other probably arranged for things to be so."

Seems likely when one thinks about it, Princess.

"What do you want to do now? I'll be glad to help," she said.

I'd like to find a way to get back to Merlin, I said. He's had a general aura of danger about him for some time—to which I am particularly sensitive.

"I understand," she said, "and I'll find a way. It may take a few days, but I'll figure out something."

All right. I'll wait. I said. I've no real choice in the matter.

"You're welcome to stay with me till that happens."

I'll do that, I said. Thanks.

I found a comfortable-looking table and wrapped myself about one of its legs. I went into stasis then, if one needs a word for it. It is not sleep, as there is no loss of consciousness. But there is no thinking in the conventional sense either. I just sort of spread out my awareness and *am*, until I am needed.

How long I lay coiled in this position, I have no way of telling. I was alone in the sitting room, though I was aware of Flora's breathing next door.

Suddenly, she shrieked. This time, I just loosened myself and dropped to the floor.

As I began hurrying toward the room I heard another voice. "Sorry," it said. "I am pursued. I had no choice but to drop in without invitation."

"Who are you?" she asked.

"Well, I'm a sorcerer," he said. "I was hiding in your

mirror, as I have every *night* for a long while. I have this crush on you and I like to watch you as you go about your business."

"A Peeping Tom—a voyeur!" she said.

"No," he said. "I think you're a really nice-looking lady, and I like watching you. That's all."

"There are many legitimate ways by which you could have gained an introduction," she said.

"True, but that may might have led to horrible complications in my life."

"Oh, you're married."

"Worse than that," he said.

"What, then?"

"No time now. I can feel its approach," he said.

"What's approach?"

"The guisel," he said. "I sent one to slay another sorcerer, but he disposed of it and sent one of his own after me. Didn't know he was that good. I don't know how to dispose of the things, and it will be oozing through that mirror in a matter of minutes, to destroy us all most nastily. So, this place being Amber and all, is there some hero available who might be anxious to earn another merit badge?"

"I think not," she replied. "Sorry."

Just then the mirror began to darken.

"Oh, it's coming!" he cried.

I had felt the menace it exuded some time before. But then, that is my job.

But now I got a glimpse of the thing. It was big, and wormlike, eyeless, but possessed of a sharklike mouth, a multitude of short legs, and vestigial wings. It was twice again the length of a human, and black, having crisscrossing red and yellow stripes. It slithered across our reflected room, rearing as it came on.

"You imply," Flora said, "in your quest of a hero, that it will make it through that interface and attack us."

"In a word," said the strange little man, "yes."

When it does, I said to Flora, throw me at it. Wherever I hit I'll stick—and I'll go for the throat.

"All right," she said, "and there's one other thing."

What's that? I asked.

"Help! Help!" she cried.

It began crawling out through the silver, flower-bordered

mirror. Flora unwound me from her ankle and threw me at the thing. It had no real neck, but I wrapped myself about its upper extremity below the mouth and began tightening immediately.

Flora continued to call out, and from somewhere up the hall I heard the sound of heavy footfalls.

I tightened and tightened my grip, but the creature's neck was like rubber.

The sorcerer was moving to exit the room when the door burst open and the tall and husky, red-haired form of Luke entered.

"Flora!" he said, and then he saw the guisel and drew his blade.

On my recent journey with Merlin in the space between shadows I had gained the ability to converse at complex levels. My perceptions—which seem quite different—also became more acute. They showed me nothing special about Luke, the sorcerer, or the guisel, but Werewindle now burned of an entirely different light. I realized then that it was not merely a blade.

As Luke moved to position himself between Flora and the guisel, I heard the sorcerer say, "What is the blade?"

"Tis called Werewindle," Luke replied.

"And you are...?"

"Rinaldo, King of Kashfa," Luke said.

"Your father—who was he?"

"Brand—Prince of Amber."

"Of course," the sorcerer said, moving again toward the door. "You can destroy that thing with it. Command it to draw energy while you're using it. It has a virtually limitless supply to draw upon."

"Why?" Luke asked.

"Because it isn't really a sword."

"What is it then?"

"Sorry," the sorcerer said, regarding the guisel, which was now moving toward us. "Out of time. Got to find another mirror."

I could tell that he was, unaware of my presence, really teasing Luke, because I had figured it out for myself and knew that it would take only a moment to tell him, if one could speak.

Then I was disengaging and dropping as fast as I could, for Luke was swinging Werewindle, and I'd no desire to be

severed. I really did not know what would happen if this were to occur—if both segments would wind up as wise, witty, and conscious as myself; or, perhaps, whether I would be destroyed in the process. And having no desire to learn this information firsthand, flight seemed most prudent.

I hit the floor before the blow fell. A section of the guisel's head also dropped, still writhing. I squirmed toward Luke's nearest ankle. Flora picked up a heavy chair and brought it down on the thing's back with considerable force, despite her broken fingernail. And she swung it a couple of more times, with some effect, while Luke was in the process of cutting it in half.

I found my way to where I was headed, crawled up, and caught hold.

Can you hear me, Luke? I tried them.

"Yes," he replied. "What are you?"

Merlin's strangling cord, Frakir.

Luke swung at the hind section then as it whipped toward him, tiny legs clawing. Then he whirled and halved the attacking forepart. Flora struck its rear end again with the chair.

I know what the sorcerer knew, I said.

"Oh, what's that?" he asked, slicing off another section and slipping on its gooey exudations as he retreated.

You might well be able to draw enough energy through Werewindle to destroy a world.

"Really?" he said, struggling to regain his feet as a section of the creature thrust itself upon him. "All right."

He touched it with the point of his blade and it withdrew from him as if shocked. Then he rose to his feet.

"You're right," he said. "There's something to it." He touched the attacking segment again and it vanished in a burst of blue fire. "Flora! Get back!" he cried.

She did, and he proceeded to incinerate the section that had been about to attack her. Then another that came at him.

"I'm getting the hang of it," he said, turning to get another segment. "But I'm not quite sure why it works this way."

It's not just a sword, I said.

"What is it, then?"

Long before there was Werewindle, it was the spikard Rawg.

"Spikard? Like that strange ring Merlin picked up?"

Exactly.

With rapid moves then, Luke disposed of the rest of the guisel.

"Thanks, Frakir," he said. "for telling me how the thing worked. I'd better try a quick search for that sorcerer now, though I've a hunch he disappeared into the nearest mirror."

I'd guess that, too.

"What was his name?"

He didn't say.

"It figures."

"Flora," he continued, "I'm going to look for that sorcerer. I'll be back in a bit. Good show."

She gave him a smile and he departed. Needless to say, the sorcerer did not turn up.

"Wonder where he came from, beyond the mirror," Luke asked.

I've no idea, I replied. I think I might be more interested in the person who sent that thing after him.

Luke nodded.

"What now?" he asked.

I guess we tell Flora that her Peeping Tom has hit the road, I said. *You're a sorcerer. Any way of fixing her mirrors so he can't pull that routine again?*

"I think so," Luke said, moving to the nearest window and looking out. "I'll fix them in just a bit. What about you?"

I'd like to get back to Merlin.

"I can't send you through by Trumps if he's in the Courts—and I suspect he is."

What about Werewindle?

"I still don't know exactly how it works. I'm going to have to practice some with it."

Uh—why are you here? I asked.

"Had to talk to Vialle about a number of things," he said, "and she told me that Corwin might be by soon—and she offered me room and board if I wanted to wait for him for a few days."

Well, if you can wear me till he gets here maybe I can persuade him to take me with him. I've a feeling he'll be seeing Merlin again soon.

"I might, too, but it's had to say at this point."

Okay. We can work it out when the time comes.

"What do you think is going on, anyway?"

Some horrible Wagnerian thing, I told him, full of blood, thunder, and death for us all.

"Oh, the usual," Luke said.

Exactly, I replied.

Publishing Note:

"Coming to A Cord," above, is the third of the five Amber short stories that Roger Zelazny completed before his death.

"The Salesman's Tale" was published in Amberzine #6.

"The Shrouding and the Guisel" was published in Amberzine #8.

The last two stories, both featuring Corwin as the narrative voice, "Blue Horse, Dancing Mountains" and "The Hall of Mirrors," will each appear in upcoming issues.

It was Roger's express wish that his Amber Universe not be opened to other authors. Therefore, "The Hall of Mirrors" brings the saga of Amber to a permanent close.

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LOOK, UM...
MORGAN,
RIGHT?

WHEN YOU ARRIVED,
OUR DIMENSION HERE
STARTED FLUXING
OUT. WE KNEW YOU
HAD SOMETHING TO
DO WITH IT, BUT
NOT WHAT YOUR
MOTIVES WERE.

I KNOW WHAT
IT'S LIKE TO BE PUT
THROUGH THE RINGER
LIKE YOU HAVE. BELIEVE
ME. BUT TRY TO UNDERSTAND...

SO WE RIGGED A SCHEME TO
ENTICE YOU INTO ADJUSTING
THE PATTERN. HENCE MY FACE
CHANGE AND JULIAN'S DEMEANOR.

YOU WERE SEEN AS
A POSSIBLE THREAT.
NOW THAT YOU'VE
WALKED THE PATTERN
(AND IT'S BEHAVING),
YOU'RE FREE TO LEAVE
IF YOU WISH. I
SENSE THAT YOU
WANT ANSWERS.
YOU MAY FIND
THEM HERE.

WELL... HE'S RIGHT
ABOUT THE ANSWERS.
ONLY SOME THINGS
WERE REVEALED
WHEN I WALKED
THIS PATTERN, AND
I DON'T KNOW HOW
TO GET BACK TO
SHADOWFAX, SO.....

O.K., BUT ONE THING...

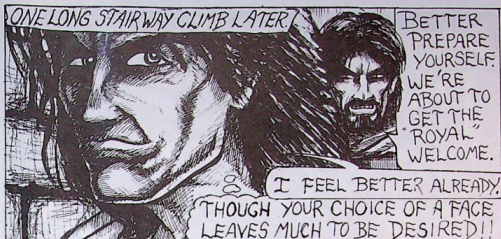
IF I HAD DESTROYED
YOUR PATTERN?
WHAT THEN?

NOW, I HAVE SOMETHING I
WANT TO SET UP BEFORE
WE REACH THE TOP GAME?

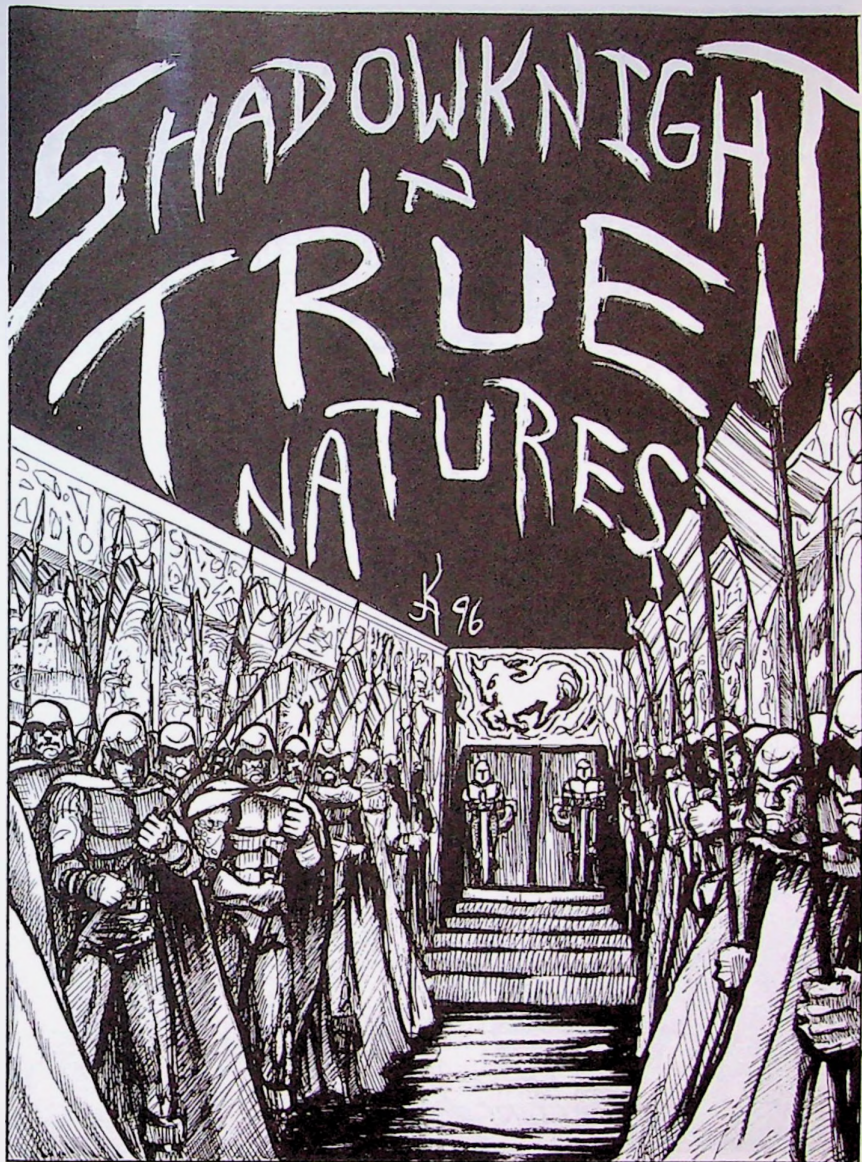
WE WOULDN'T BE
TALKING NOW IF
YOU HAD TRIED THAT.

UH... SURE.

GREAT..
♪♪♪



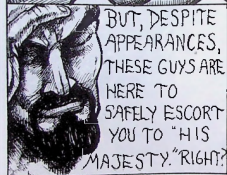




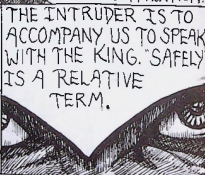


WHEW. IF THIS IS A ROYAL WELCOME, I'D HATE TO SEE A ROYAL BRUSH-OFF.

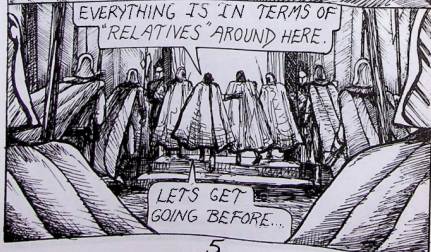
WELCOME TO AMBER. YOU SHOW UP UNANNOUNCED, AND YOU GET RANDOM'S PERSONAL ATTENTION.



BUT, DESPITE APPEARANCES, THESE GUYS ARE HERE TO SAFELY ESCORT YOU TO "HIS MAJESTY." RIGHT?



THE INTRUDER IS TO ACCOMPANY US TO SPEAK WITH THE KING. "SAFELY" IS A RELATIVE TERM.

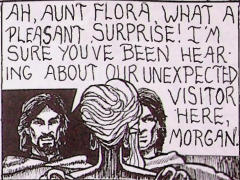


EVERYTHING IS IN TERMS OF "RELATIVES" AROUND HERE.

LET'S GET GOING BEFORE...

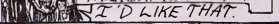


SHAME
ON YOU,
MERLIN!
WE HAD A
LUNCH
DATE AND
OH MY!
WHO IS
THIS?



A GENTLEMAN. AND HANDSOME TOO.
I TAKE IT YOU'RE BEING ESCORTED
TO KING RANDOM. YES. INDEED.
WELL, HE SHOULD HAVE NO
PROBLEMS TALKING WITH YOU.
PERHAPS WE CAN THEN
TALK... AFTERWARDS.

I AM ENCHANTED.



WHY WOULD I
WANT TO?
YOU'LL SEE.

SOON...

AHH...
MERLIN
AND FRIENDS.
HOW NICE
OF YOU
TO VISIT.

GREETINGS
VIALLE.

RANDOM WILL BE HERE
SHORTLY. YOU GENTLEMEN
MAY WAIT HERE.
MERLIN, PLEASE
APPROACH ME.

IF I
MAY?

SHE'S...
BLIND.

≡GULP≡ OF COURSE.

PAIN... CONFUSION... A
SENSE OF LOSS... MY MY,
YOU'VE EXPERIENCED
MUCH IN THESE LAST
FEW DAYS, HAVEN'T
YOU "MERLIN"?

INTERESTING,
BUT YOU'LL
HAVE TO DO
BETTER NEXT
TIME. YOU SEE,
MY BLINDNESS
IS NOT A
"CRUTCH."

AHEM!!



WELCOME BACK, RANDOM. I WAS JUST ENTERTAINING OUR GUESTS.

UH-HUH.



MERLIN, CUT THE SHIT AND TAKE THE SPELL DOWN.



GULP

ALRIGHT.



IT WAS A... PRECAUTION, RANDOM. I THOUGHT HE MIGHT BE IN DANGER.



A SIMPLE SPELL, REALLY. WE
"APPEARED" AS EACH OTHER. I
KNEW YOU WOULDN'T BE FOOLED.



THANKS FOR THE COMPLIMENT.
I'M GONNA JUST LOVE HEARING
YOUR REPORT, BUT I HAVE SOME-
THING TO ATTEND TO NOW SOOOO....



..WOULD YOU
ALL PLEASE
LEAVE WHILE
"MORGAN" AND I
HAVE A NICE
LITTLE CHAT.

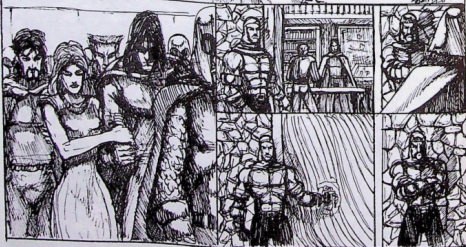


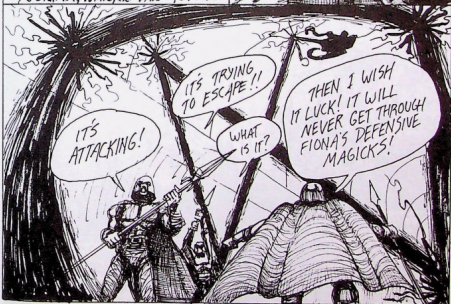
UM...
YOUR
HIGHNESS?



DON'T MAKE
ME MAKE IT
A ROYAL DECREE.

GO!!!









SOME FORCE IS
SUMMONING ME... I
CAN'T RESIST! LOOKS
LIKE YOU'RE ON
YOUR OWN, MORGAN.



IF THERE IS
POTENTIAL DANGER...



...THEN I WILL ...



MEET IT IN MY
TRUE FORM.



THIS PLACE ... A CITY
IN THE CLOUDS
STRANGELY FAMILIAR.



THE CALL
IS COMING
FROM WITHIN.



HEH HEH HEH... SO THERE YOU ARE, MY DEAR...



NEXT: DARK REVELATIONS

We first met Kajina back in Amberzine #7 as one of Joe Saul's discoveries. Somehow Shai's last name shifted since then...

Written in Blood: *A Day Passes in Kajina's Tale*

by Shai Strouse

Adapted from Bernard Hsiung's "Blood's Price" campaign

Seventeen and several months after Patternfall

Kajina caught the servant's body as it slumped, and transferred its tray of goblets to the table before removing her dagger from the base of its skull.

It, its, its—the corpse had been a girl, perhaps thirteen at most. Brand leaned forward to inspect the tablecloth.

"The tray."

Kajina braced the slight corpse against her side, then reached for the tray with both hands.

Brand flicked a finger. "No. One hand."

She picked up the tray with her right hand alone, without significant pause in motion. The linen where it had been was spotless. Unfortunately for the former serving girl, the same was not true for a swath of tablecloth near it.

An angelic expression lit Brand's face for an instant. It retreated from his eyes before he turned back to his dinner companions.

"And you were saying, Caine?"

Caine merely smiled.

"By the time the hailstorm hit," Gérard rumbled, "we had chased them almost to Garnath."

Brand's tone was mild. "Livelier selection of miscreants than usual?"

Gérard nodded between a drink and a swallow. To his left lounged Julian, who had fixed his glacial gaze on Kajina.

Caine kept his eyes on Brand.

"Shame we had to leave them for the 'hounds,'" Gérard muttered.

Brand's smile grew a touch wider. "Pity I was not informed in time to join you."

Kajina remained corpse-still while they continued to divulge inanities, even though her fingers were beginning to cramp from

keeping the tray balanced. Too many hours without rest were taking their toll; her hip was already turning numb from the body's weight. A muscle in her jaw tightened.

I am weak.

Mid-chuckle, Brand reached over to take a goblet from the tray.

"Child, I am feeling generous this evening. Retire to your chambers after disposing of the body."

Kajina bowed from the waist as far as corpse, silver and crystal would permit her.

Brand laughed at something Julian murmured, then waggled a finger at him. "And put that tray down, you stupid bitch."

She did so, and bowed again before hefting the body onto her shoulder.

The rouged and powdered boy tending the door took two steps back when she approached him, one more than he needed to open the door for her. His left hand stole to a button of his waistcoat and remained there until she had crossed the threshold.

"Hold!" echoed down the hallway after her second step into it, accompanied by the sound of pedicured feet on stone.

Kajina did not interrupt her departure.

Sea green silk slid over then spilled onto the floor as Florimel breezed past her and entered the dining room. The page, buried under the Princess' discarded robe, staggered out into the corridor, aided by a shove from within.

Applause started inside the dining room.

The lamplighters were finishing their rounds by the time Kajina stooped into the Castle Charnelry. Lord William was at one of the back tables, extracting a gold tooth from the mouth of a retired guard. He looked up when she entered, then smiled, flashing his desiccated gums.

"Greetings, Milady!"

He pushed up his broken spectacles and took a second squint at Kajina's burden. The action left a red thumbprint on the bridge of his waxy nose.

"Oise, it looks like you've brought in another nice one for me! Yes, nice and clean Milady takes them! Ne'er have to muck about in blood and innards, I would, if Milady brought me all the dead ones!" He made a giddy noise, and waved at the counter. "Put her there if you would, Milady."

Kajina set the body down on its stomach so it would not further ruin the stained and scarred wood.

Grim Billy removed the tooth from the guard's jaw with a loud crack and a tearing of gum tissues.

"Ah. There it goes."

He tucked the molar into the pouch on his belt, and wiped the gore from his scabrous hands on his filthy apron.

"Another little duck gone to the..." He glanced at Kajina after he walked up to the counter. "From one of Milady's daggers?"

She nodded. "Serving girl. Royal Dining Room."

Billy mused as he peered at the body claim tax chart posted on the counter, and pulled out a sheaf of note leaves from the front pocket of his apron. He scratched on one with a charcoal stub.

"I'll take good care of her, Milady."

Kajina's mouth twitched.

"Good even to you, Milady!" Billy called, when he noticed that she was leaving.

She did not respond.

A few hours into darkness

For Kajina, there had been cold soup, a chunk of dry bread and a glass of sweet wine after brief ablution. All but the washing had been shared with the massive grey cat now perched on the left arm of her chair.

Joss blinked as Kajina turned another page in the picture book she was dozing off over. His tail twitched, dislodging the hat on the rag doll tucked into the crook of her arm.

Her eyelids flicked open a moment after he had disappeared.

There was a knock on the door.

Kajina closed her book and set her doll aside.

"A moment."

She threw a scarlet robe on over her pyjamas, and picked up Svetaslaf from beside her chair.

The caller was a guard with bright blue eyes and a hound-like nose between his bristly eyebrows and neat beard. He did not look at her more than was necessary.

She buckled her sword belt. "Yes, Lon?"

He licked his lips. "The King has just fought and won a duel against a girl child."

She looked up at him.

Lon swallowed.

"He was unhurt," he blurted. "She is currently in our custody. We do not know how she got into the Castle. There will be a full investigation in the morning. Geller thought you should be informed."

"Is Geller in his office?" Kajina whispered.

Lon nodded instead of breathing.

"Dismissed," she barked, and shut the door in his face.

One of the Netzach loomed in the corridor outside Geller's office. The creature made what for it passed as a salute before it opened the door for Kajina.

She nodded before crossing the threshold.

A testimony to the true state of affairs. His Majesty's beasts are far more capable of execution than investigation, which hints that all of those who are capable of the latter have been set to that task.

The black-haired young man seated behind the large desk in the office pushed aside the Castle map he had been studying, but did not get up. The motion almost buried an empty traveling pack and the small pile of clothing next to it on the desk. More plainly visible were a set of pipes, a knife, a sword's hilt, and a few strips of a brown leathery substance.

"I was half-expecting you," he said, waving to the only other chair in the room.

Kajina paid the offer as much obvious attention as she did everything else in the room. This included Geller's being engaged in investigation despite his instructions to Lon to tell her that it would begin tomorrow.

He is my superior officer. I should not question him if his actions are not placing His Majesty at risk.

However, he is behaving like a child.

Geller rubbed his clean-shaven chin and frowned, but not at her. His green eyes, ordinarily hard and bright, were dark with thought.

"All right, he said after a moment. "Let's see if you can make anything of this. A little girl, about this tall..." He gestured to a spot approximately four and a half feet above the floor. "...can't be more than twelve or so. Her hair is fairly long—reddish brown, I'd say. She's medium-complected and has brown eyes. She was wearing what appeared to be squire's clothing under one of the old tabards... the green ones with the white unicorn on them. Identified herself as the Lady Cheryn of Amber."

Kajina felt an echo of Geller's frown begin to map onto her features. She dismissed it.

"How?"

Geller smirked. "She didn't kill anyone. Didn't need to. Taylor, the fool, let her in and took her to see the King. He might swing for that in the morning."

He raked a hand through his glossy hair without discernable altering the arrangement of its thick strands.

"Anyway, when she got here, she—get this—challenged the King to a duel of honor 'for the sake of the True Unicorn and Amber'. He accepted and beat her. It wasn't even close."

Kajina nodded, acknowledging his answer. Silence then ensued for almost a full minute.

Very well. If he does not wish to bring up the subject, I will.

She reached down and lifted the map to get a better look at the contents under it. An earthenware mug, disturbed by the movement, rolled out of the pack. It didn't make it off the desk.

"All that's what she was carrying," Geller said.

Kajina gave the mug one shake before she turned it over in her hands. It felt and sounded every bit like a piece of simple crockery. Moreover, it looked the part; it was unglazed except for a milky slip on the inside, and it bore no potter's mark. The same was true of the pipes.

"These should be examined for ensorcelments, if they have not been," she murmured.

Geller nodded distractedly. "It has all been. There is no magick on any of it." He chewed on a corner of his chiseled mouth as he watched her pick up the knife on the desk.

"We weren't allowed to interrogate her," he noted. "The King wanted to do that himself. He gave orders that she be placed in one of the more comfortable guest rooms and left alone."

Kajina brought the knife closer to the desk lamp.

It is not an assassin's dagger. More of a general purpose blade.

There were a few shards of flat brown fibers caught where the crosspiece fit over the blade. She picked up one of the leathery strips on the desk and compared its texture to the fibers.

Venison, likely.

"So..." Geller said, after a moment. "We don't know anything else about her. Julian has his men scouring the grounds trying to find out where she came from."

Kajina placed the venison strip and dagger down, then uncovered the sword. It proved to be a broadsword of effective, although ordinary, workmanship. Judging from Geller's description and the size of the clothing in the pile on the desk, the child would have needed both hands to wield it, unless she was unusually strong. Kajina made a note to take the latter into account.

His Majesty will interrogate the child tomorrow.

I will be there.

I will not fail him.

Geller frowned again. "She got far enough to try to assassinate the King, but fought a duel instead—a duel that she wasn't anywhere good enough to win. She's too young to know about old Amber, but wears its symbol. It doesn't add up. Do you have any ideas?"

Kajina reached inside her robe and pyjama top and took out a dagger.

"Youth can be deceiving," she murmured, as she began dissecting the articles of clothing. They were all of wool and linen,

with a quality of fabric and construction that bespoke nobility, or at least wealth. "It is possible 'she' could be an ancient one of Chaos, thinking that by taking the form of a child, it could gain unimpeded access to His Majesty. Perhaps Taylor was swayed both by its apparent youth and great strength of will."

"Perhaps," Geller agreed. "It probably won't save him in the morning."

"However, if such were so," Kajina added. "and its goal was to assassinate His Majesty or to vanquish him in a physical duel, then it would be foolish for it to retain the form of a child once it was granted access. If its goal was to set up a duel to lose, in such a way that would attract His Majesty's attention rather than to ensure its instant death..."

I must be careful not to limit my considerations. This is a situation that requires thought.

She let out a soft breath, and continued in the same low tone.

"In another vein of deception, the child could be what she claims and appears to be: a scion of the Old Amber. It is possible that she was born and reared there for a number of years during the time before His Majesty became King, then removed to a shadow where time moves slowly, relative to Amber. This is plausible. That she is an ordinary girl, reared by those who possessed knowledge of the Old Amber is also plausible."

"As for how she got in; I believe her tabard would have made her notable, if she wore it for long. It should not take a considerable amount of time to find out which ship she came in on."

Kajina left the remains of the clothing alone, then took up the traveling pack. She began using the tip of her dagger to separate it at the seams.

"This is of course assuming she traveled in the usual manner. Circumstances indicate that this might not be so."

The pack was made of tough material, but its seams were no match for Kajina's practiced ripping. In less than a minute, she had established that it had no secret compartments.

Geller nodded. "That all seems reasonable to me. Still, that she should take it upon herself to duel the King, I... well, unless it is a distraction, yes." He pursed his lips. "I've already taken the precaution of doubling the guard, and the Watch is on alert."

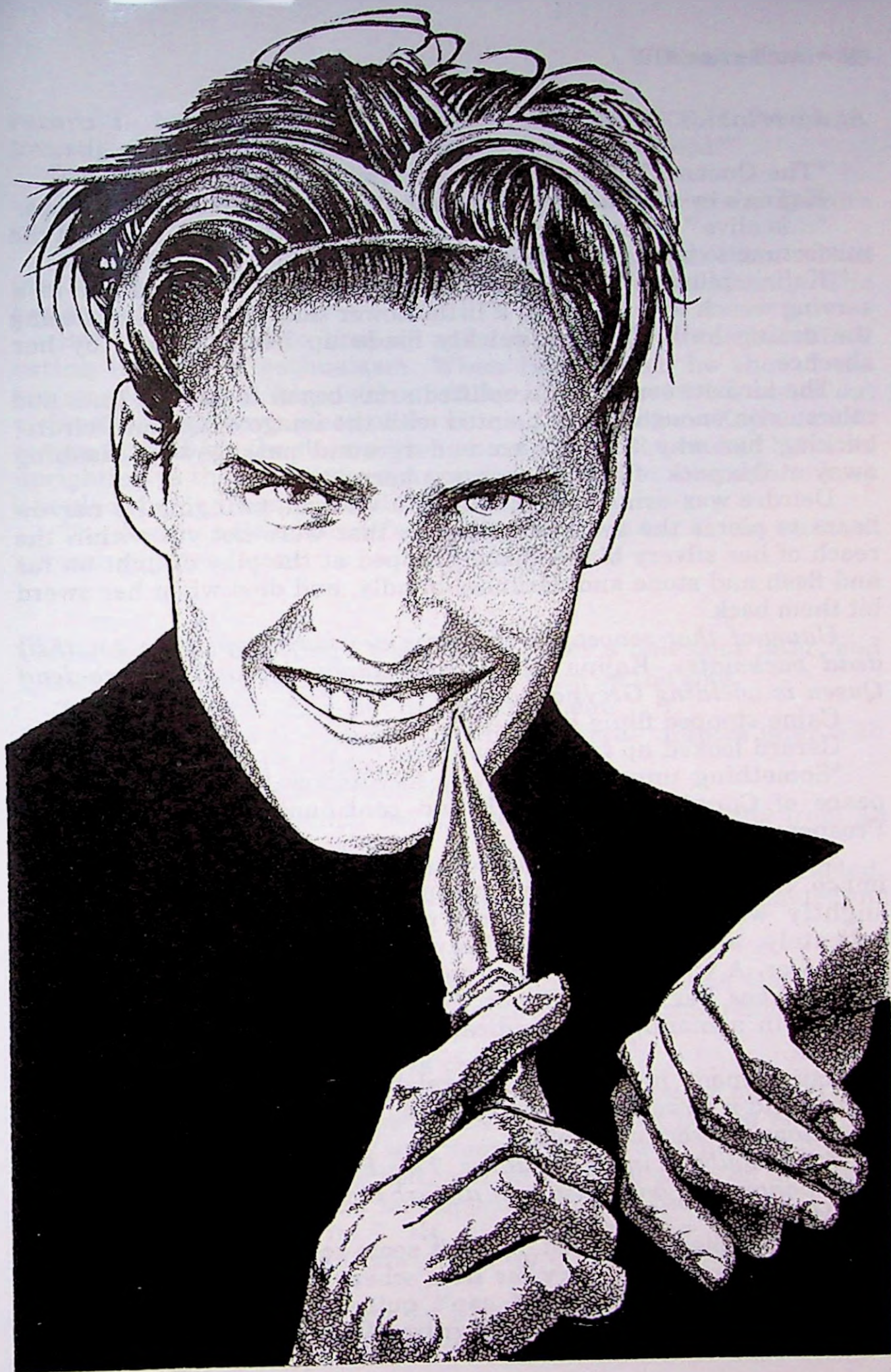
Kajina returned her dagger to its hidden sheath.

Geller looked at her in silence for several moments, as if he was weighing the merits of mentioning something else.

"Ah, well," he said, and got up from his chair. "Time for bed. I doubt we'll find out more before tomorrow. It'll be a long day..."

He chuckled under his breath as he put out the lamp.

Kajina was already gone.



At daybreak

"The Queen..."

Kajina's eyelids stopped their infinitesimal creep toward a close.

"...is alive!" Brand snarled, hurling the empty goblet that had the misfortune to be in his hand.

Kajina plucked it out of midair and passed it behind her to a serving wench who had been a little slower than the others in fleeing the dining hall. The girl quickly made up her tardiness by her absence.

The air between Brand's uplifted arms began to take on lines and colors; soon enough it was painted with the image of Queen Deirdre, backing her way through an underground passageway, slashing away at the pack of hyenas that was harrying her.

Deirdre was using a flashlight as a weapon, swinging its narrow beam to pierce the eyes of the beasts that were not yet within the reach of her silvery blade. Some snapped at the play of light on fur and flesh and stone and darkness blindly, and died when her sword bit them back.

Unusual that scavenger creatures are not stopping to eat their dead packmates, Kajina noted. And unusual that the once-dead Queen is wielding Greyswandir.

Caine stopped filing his nails.

Gérard looked up from his oatmeal.

"Something unusual lurks out in Shadow that has upset the peace of Corwin's Pattern," Brand continued. "Someone named Prospera."

Another patch of air above the dining table curdled into an image, this time a static one. This one showed a young woman with slightly wavy golden hair and intensely blue eyes. She was delicately, almost impossibly beautiful, with an ethereal quality about her. A wide-brimmed hat shadowed her elfin face, and loose-fitting robes her waifish limbs. She carried a staff and a pouch, neither in a manner that indicated she knew how to use it as a weapon.

Kajina made her standard correlation between near-impossible beauty and a powerful strength of will, dryly noting that there were exceptions to every correlation.

But, I doubt so in this instance. This Prospera has been cited as a disturbance, and one must be a disturbance of magnitude to trouble His Majesty.

Brand looked perplexed. "I can't seem to trace her, but I doubt she could have gotten very far from where Deirdre is. She may be able to travel in Shadow. I can't quite..." He exhaled. "Caine. Gérard. I want you to subdue Deirdre. After that, Gérard, you will

return to her to Amber. Caine, you will track this Prospera, investigate and do what is necessary. Is that understood?"

They both nodded, and held out their hands.

"Good. You will find yourselves outside the cave where Deirdre is."

Brand widened his arms, and the pictures between them turned into a rainbow smudge as he took Caine and Gérard's hands. The two vanished.

Brand grumbled to himself and turned back to his breakfast, eating it without enthusiasm. When he finished, he shoved the empty plates from him with a clatter, and shoved his chair out viciously. The heavy piece of furniture tipped before Kajina could secure it, and hit the floor with a sharp crack. She had to leave its uprighing to the servants; even so, she still had to scramble to keep her place behind him as he stormed out.

The iron handle of Brand's chamber door hit her in the stomach several minutes later.

Geller came by the King's Chambers almost a half hour later, and looked at her questioningly before he knocked on the door.

Kajina lifted her chin, but did not comment.

Geller departed the King's Chambers several minutes later with a thoughtful look on his face.

"He said call a page to fetch him Lady Misty."

Kajina gestured behind her at the page eavesdropping from an adjacent corridor. The boy fled.

Lady Misty arrived nearly a half hour after Geller departed, wearing a sea blue dress with no flounce, only a hint of makeup, and a dazzling smile.

Kajina did not smile in return.

Misty closed the door behind her more quietly than Geller had. Several more minutes than Geller had spent in conference passed without incident.

Then, there were footsteps in the corridor.

I have not heard that gait around here for a number of years.

She turned her head just in time to see Lord Dyvim enter the hallway from the south. He was wearing a sword on his left hip, an eating knife tucked into his belt, and an artificial smile on his ruddy face. He winked at her after he stopped in front of the door.

"Hello. Earl Dyvim." He punctuated the unnecessary introduction with a slight bow and a tip of his hat. "Is His Majesty in?"

Kajina let her gaze linger for a moment on the placement of his hands, then flicked it upward to note his stance.

"Were you sent for by His Majesty?" she murmured.

Dyvim's chuckle sounded forced.

"No, I'm not sure His Majesty realizes I have returned from the siege at Rebma. I left a note last night when I got in, but unless my knowledge of courtesy has completely faded, I believe I should present myself in person."

He adjusted his hat, and in the process, glanced at the ring on his right hand.

Kajina kept the same soft tone. "Since you were not sent for, and His Majesty is currently in audience, I believe you should let the note you claimed to have left speak for your presence in the Castle at this time."

Dyvim arched an eyebrow. "Claimed to have left..." He laughed quietly. "Well, all right then. If you'd be so kind as to let my uncle know I did try to see him?"

Kajina nodded without lowering her gaze.

He stepped back and bowed. "Well, it's been a pleasant conversation indeed."

He then glanced left, then right, as if debating which direction to take. After this, he looked back at her, momentarily studying her face. Then he turned left and took a few steps. He stopped short, after those, and turned to look at her. The whole process resembled a newt's trying to escape a cauldron.

"I am most sorry, dear lady," Dyvim said. "It seems I've forgotten your name. Since I've introduced myself..." He pursed his lips. "I must ask that you do the same, or we shall forever be on unequal terms."

This fop is undoubtedly making fun of me. I remember him being in the banquet hall when His Majesty presented me to...

A dull throb at the back of her head swallowed up the recollection. A frown tugged at her lips.

It does not matter. I deserve this.

"Kajina," she whispered.

Dyvim was thoughtful for a moment.

"A name that sings," he said at last, before bowing again. "I shall leave you to your lonely post then, while I collect breakfast."

Kajina retained the almost-frown. The throb in her head was beginning to spread.

Toads also sing, and likely just as well.

"Perhaps we shall meet again when you are less talkative," Dyvim added, slightly sarcastically.

She nodded, just a little.

It is within the realm of possibilities.

He resumed going left. This time, he managed to stroll away, whistling a tune.

Kajina kept one eye on Dyvim's progress until he was out of sight and arrow range. Her eyelids were an eyelash on their way toward sliding closed when the door to the King's Chambers flew open and the Lady Misty scurried out.

Since Brand did not call out, Kajina reconsidered throwing the dagger that had found a place in her hand. She stepped back to her post by the door, and sheathed it.

After noon

Kajina's headache had subsided a little by the time outraged bellowing started in the King's Chambers.

She dropped a hand to Svetasla's hilt before she jerked open the door, just in time to see Brand throw a small thin object at her.

Gérard's Trump smacked into the wall behind and beside her head and flashed into brief but spectacular flame. Kajina did not hear any ashes falling.

She remained on the threshold.

The King looked like he was perilously close to catching flame himself. He was stomping around in circles, gesturing every which way, and swearing incoherently. In its bracket on the wall, Werewindle pulsed dark red light.

Suddenly, Brand's gaze fell on Kajina. He stopped in mid-stomp.

Werewindle flickered once and went out. Brand snatched it off the wall and started to buckle it on.

"Evidently, if you want something done right, you have to do it yourself. I should have known the big oaf would find some way to louse this up," he snarled. "Lock the door behind you and come here."

Kajina stepped into the room, and reached behind her to secure the door before walking to within arm's reach of Brand. She glanced over the chamber, taking in everything, even though she knew the source of his exasperation lay elsewhere.

He grabbed her right shoulder, conveying a rainbow-tinged spark—a quick note within the dead cold of his grip. The room shuddered and fell away.

Kajina's boots crunched against rock. An arid gust burst against her face, as if complaining about some offense.

Gérard sat on a white stallion before them, looking somewhat sheepish.

"Go ahead," Brand snapped. "Explain what happened."

He blinked. "I already—"

"Not to me, you great lummo, tell her!" Brand snarled. He scowled as he scanned the leaden horizon.

Gérard grumbled something under his breath, before adding,

"Caine and I found ourselves outside a cave a number of hours back in our journey. We went inside, and found a trail of dead mutts leading deeper in. So, we both followed it until we caught the sound of Deirdre in the next chamber. Caine gestured to me and said..."

"Get on with it!" Brand hissed, without looking away from the distance.

"I was getting to th..." Gérard protested.

Kajina's mouth quirked.

Dolt.

Gérard let out an exasperated breath. "Anyway, I went in, and Caine followed me. While Deirdre was trying to figure out how she was going to handle the situation, he put a dagger into her sword arm. I bound her arm up while we questioned her about why she was still alive and how she got her hands on Greyswandir. She wasn't in the mood to talk, so we tied her up, and Caine took off to find that Prospera wench. I set out riding for Amber."

Gérard looked between Brand and Kajina. "Everything was going well until I ran into a thunderstorm that I could not get away from, no matter what direction I took in shadow. I tried to outrun it for a couple of hours, then decided to see if I could Trump out. My trump of Brand didn't seem to work, but whoever had that Trump of Deirdre seemed to have no problems—they took her and Greyswandir both right off the horse. The storm vanished as soon as she did."

Kajina's eyes narrowed.

"His Majesty was able to transport you and Caine both to the Queen's location," she murmured. "Did you not consider it possible that He would have been able to receive a Trump call from that location? If you had contacted Him instead of taking off through shadow, this situation may not have occurred. His Majesty could have pulled you and the Queen through, or could have instructed Caine to leave off his search for this Prospera woman and accompany you to Amber, which would have perhaps increased your chances of arriving there with the Queen and Greyswandir. But, no..."

"That can't be right," Brand muttered, more to himself than anyone else. "Gérard, stay here. Kajina, be prepared."

He took her shoulder again, and the world tilted about forty-five degrees. There was an entrance to a shallow cave at the bottom of the angled rise they were standing atop.

Brand motioned for silence, then drew Werewindle. He nodded to her to enter the cave.

Kajina did not draw Svetaslaf, but rested a hand on its hilt, covering as much of its mirrored detailing as she could with her glove. The smoky light twisting through the sky was wan, but it was

enough to make the steel swans twined around the sword's roundel and grip to glitter giddily.

This might be helpful later, but not now.

She slipped her other hand beneath her tabard, and slipped two slender throwing daggers from her belt. As she stepped into darkness, she transferred one of them to her sword hand.

She scanned the cave as she slid in along its left wall.

There were two figures in the back.

A male voice that she didn't recognize said "I—", then cut off suddenly as the other figure swept his legs and took them both to the ground with a muffled thump. The other had been holding its right arm unusually close to its body.

Kajina crouched, and crept forward carefully, trying to fit the sound of her movement into the natural noises of the cavern.

Twenty-five feet... twenty-three feet... twenty-one feet... and they did not move.

Twenty feet... nineteen feet...

His Majesty has given me no orders, other than to enter the cave. By my calculation, the odds seem good that the pair will remain still until I am within sword's length—or closer.

Eighteen feet...

This is a sleeping hornet's nest.

And how best to wake a sleeping hornet? Shake the nest.

Seventeen feet...

How best to shake a hornet's nest without being stung?

Do it from a distance.

Her left hand flicked out and down. The dagger that had been in it whipped through the air in the direction of the pair.

There was an explosive motion as the other figure gave the male a sudden shove, then rolled in the other direction. The dagger struck the floor of the cave between them with a clatter.

Then Brand was pinning the male to the floor with his boot. Werewindle flashed red light when Brand impaled him.

As he withdrew the blade, the other of the pair got to its feet and charged him. It grabbed him one-handed and threw him at Kajina.

"Stop her!" Brand shrieked before he collided with the cave wall that had been behind Kajina.

Kajina snapped her second dagger toward the fleeing figure's back before she hauled Svetaslaf from its scabbard.

Deirdre's long black hair billowed out behind her when Kajina's dagger struck her square in the spine. She somehow managed another leaping step before another knife from Kajina's arsenal buried up in the back of her left knee.

She made a short piercing cry as she fell.

Kajina launched herself after her...

... and slammed into the stony ground.

She had to lie there a moment before she could feel the rock bruising her through her armor. It was a moment more than that before she could gulp the air back into her lungs.

During this, she heard Brand pronounce a guttural phrase. The air within the cave developed an ambient light, enough to illuminate the chamber clearly.

"I may need a hand with this," he called, for the moment pointedly ignoring her failure to catch Deirdre. "Get in here."

Kajina got to her feet, and stooped back inside the cave.

Brand sheathed Werewindle, and walked to the male he had stabbed. He was laying face down on the ground, not far from where Greyswandir had been abandoned. He looked about five and a half feet tall, but his voluminous black robes made it difficult to judge his build.

Brand rolled him over with his foot, leaving a thick puddle of blood on the cave floor. The spreading stain on the front of his robes did little to obscure the device of the Red Unicorn.

"Hmm," Brand mused. "What have we here?" He knelt and removed the figure's helmet, revealing a man wearing a black chain mail coif. His face was lean and sharp-featured and his complexion sallow. Grey tinged his short, dark hair. He was still breathing, although with apparent difficulty, and a trickle of blood came from his mouth.

Brand sat back on his heels and looked up at Kajina. "That explains it," he said, grimacing. "My son Vlam. He's supposed to be dead. I killed him myself twenty-one years ago, and burned his body. Damn, it seems I got the wrong one."

He smiled without humor. "He was my sister's lover, that bloody-be-damned-sorceress-bitch. I wonder... no. Here, help me get all of this off him. I don't think I want him to die just yet."

Kajina sheathed her sword, and tugged off her mail gloves, tucking them into her belt as she knelt beside the body. She took out her last dagger, fished about in the folds of Vlam's robes until she found a side seam, then cut down it with the blade.

It was like peeling an onion. The black robes concealed a layer of loose silk clothing which in turn hid the rest of the black chain armor. Under the chain was a supple leather lining that covered the rest of his clothes. Scattered among and between the various layers of clothing was a plethora of small knives, razors and shuriken, as well as a wicked stiletto and a pitch-black rapier.

It was quite a few minutes before she was able to get enough off Vlam so Brand could begin to clean and bind the wound.

He is likely stronger than he appears, and certainly stronger

than me, she mused as she sorted through Vlam's items. Even though the chain and these pieces of clothing are light, considered individually, together they make up something that would be entirely too bulky for me to wear and retain a normal range of movement.

Vlam's Trumps were, with three exceptions, all in the case at his belt. The exceptions were tucked into his right boot, in a pocket on the inside of his robes, and on a spring around his left wrist: Benedict, Llewella, and a small room that Kajina did not recognize.

Her brow furrowed when she studied the hidden Trumps. She stacked them neatly on top of the others, which she had placed alongside the array of weapons that she had set down in a row.

The spring loaded Trump appears the most accessible, Llewella's Trump the next so, and Benedict's Trump seems to be the card of last resort.

Considering that His Majesty had found it mete to execute him twenty-one years ago, chances are good that he knows the meaning of last resort.

Her head swam with correlations and possible conclusions as she inspected the weapons.

He is affiliated with the rebellion in Rebma, likely. Yet not so closely affiliated that he would contact Llewella immediately in case he found himself in a difficult situation. The small room on the card is likely his home.

Why would he aid the Queen? Is he closely affiliated with her, and she with Rebma? The odds appear to be good in several aspects, yet...

Kajina noticed that Benedict's Trump was under her hand.

I do not understand. I...

There was a twinge at the back of her mind, like a sudden precursor to another headache. She pushed it away, and put the card back where it had been.

Brand tied off Vlam's bandage.

"There. That should hold his intestines where they belong, for the time being. Now, let's see what we've got."

He looked at the weapons briefly, muttering to himself, then picked up the various blades one at a time and examined each in turn.

"No magic on any of it," he announced. "Except for the rapier. That has an ever-sharp enchantment on it, and a sigil that allows its wielder to be traced, but the sigil hasn't been activated in a very long time."

Brand then picked up the three Trumps that were on top of the case. "These were separate from the others?"

Kajina indicated the spring that had been with the card of the

room.

"That was with the Trump of the room, around his left wrist. The Trump of Llewella..." She flipped over the portion of discarded robe which had contained the hidden pocket. "...was there, underneath his robes, within easy reach." She looked up. "The Trump of Prince Benedict was tucked into the top of his right boot."

A sudden stabbing pain behind her eyes forced her to blink, and to hold her tongue about commenting on the possible significance of each of Vlam's hidden Trumps.

If His Majesty wishes to be informed of my ideas, he will ask.

She rebuked herself for the consideration.

Brand nodded in response to her answer, then opened the case and flipped through the rest of the cards. Kajina noted that Deirdre's was on top, followed by Corwin's, then Oberon's, then a red-haired woman whom Kajina didn't recognize. Judging from Brand's expression, it was probably Fiona. All of the Elders appeared to be represented, and there were about a half dozen other faces that Kajina didn't know.

Brand turned them over and started to shuffle them, as if to perform a reading, then stopped and started jerking cards out of the deck instead. Most of them had the White Unicorn on green on their backs, but a few of them were quite different. Corwin's card and that of a younger man with black hair and blue eyes had a stylized dragon, and the back of Fiona's card looked like a silver city hanging in the night sky. Florimel's card showed a bouquet of violets, and Gérard's a three-masted sailing ship.

"What the hell?" Brand exclaimed.

He took Gérard's card and turned it over in his hand several times before he finally held it face-up and stared at it.

"Yes, it's me," he said a second later. "Who did you think it would be? No, don't answer that. I want you to come here. Leave the horse and take whatever was important. We're going straight back. No, she got away. You did bother to search her for her Trumps, I hope. Of course I want to see them! All right, I'll call you back in five minutes."

He broke the contact.

"Move this into a pile next to Vlam," he said, waving a hand at the various objects Vlam had been carrying. "Get your knife, too, and make sure you get Greyswandir."

He took a Trump from his belt and started to concentrate on it.

Kajina placed the items into a pile on top of Vlam's discarded clothing. Last of all, she went to get her dagger from beside the wall. The tip had been blunted, but it was otherwise undamaged. She tucked it into her belt, and rubbed between her eyebrows briefly while cradling Greyswandir in the crook of her arm.

The sharp pain had gone away, but the dull pinpoint throb it had left was still irritating, on the order of having a splinter stuck in her brain.

She pulled on her mail gloves and walked back to stand at Brand's side.

Five minutes later, he put the Trump away with a slightly annoyed expression, and took the Trump with the three-masted sailing ship in hand. He looked at it a moment, then pulled Gérard through.

"Put those down on top of the pile," he said, gesturing at Gérard's saddlebags. "Now, stand on the other side of it, and take her hand. Both of you give me your free ones."

This done, he said a short word, and the light blinked out. When it came back on, they were in his rooms in Amber.

He jerked his hands free, then knelt by Vlam's side.

"Get out of here, both of you. Now. I will send for you if I need you. Oh, and leave Deirdre's Trumps and Greyswandir before you go."

Kajina lay the blade on a table within range for an easy inspection, but quite out of Vlam's easy reach, should he wake up and she not be there to stop him from attacking the King.

She waited until Gérard had handed over Deirdre's Trumps, then followed him out the door, after one last visual sweep of the room for dangers. She closed the door behind her.

Outside, Gérard gave her a look that was equal parts anger, confusion and frustration.

"What's going on?" he muttered. "Why did you have Greyswandir and not Deirdre? How did she get away? Who was that?"

Kajina's response was delivered in a rolling monotone.

"Something. I failed to prevent her departure. Somehow. Someone."

She inclined her head slightly, and turned to start north up the hallway.

Gérard's hands clenched convulsively. He took a step toward her, then seemed to realize just what it was that he was doing. He let out a roar, spun on his heel, and slammed a mailed fist into the wall hard enough to cause its veneer to splinter and crack.

Then he did it again.

With his second blow, chips of stone flew from the wall where he had struck it.

And again.

With the third, the doors to Brand's rooms opened.

Kajina turned, hand on sword hilt.

Brand stood there, his hands smeared with freshly spilled blood. His normally spotless white robes were covered with bright red

splotches.

Kajina almost completed a step before she recognized that the blood's source was external.

"What in the blazes?" Brand muttered. "Oh. You. Take it somewhere else, damnit. How am I supposed to get any work done with all this racket?"

Gérard turned to him slowly, his face flushed and contorted with several different emotions, none of them particularly kind or benevolent.

"Brand. Why don't you ever tell me what's going on?"

Brand gestured, slinging more scarlet onto his robes. He glanced down, frowned faintly, then looked directly at Kajina.

"Get him out of here. Try not to damage that brain cell of his any more than you have to. You never know—someday he might find a use for..."

Kajina drew her sword.

"Come," she murmured.

A low rumbling noise started from somewhere within Gérard's chest, and he lunged for Brand's throat with both of his hands.

Kajina's mouth tightened.

His Majesty wishes him to remain alive?

Very well.

There was a spray of blood as Gérard's left ear separated from his head.

Gérard didn't even notice. He had both hands on Brand's neck, and was shaking him like a large dog might worry a squirrel. His bellowing was causing the lamps in the hallway to craze.

Brand's part in things appeared to be limited to turning an unpleasant shade of purple, though his mouth worked as if he was muttering something, and his gore-slimmed hands pulled at Gérard's arms without visible effect. A feather-flicker of red lightning slid across his body and was gone again.

Their little tableau had already attracted an audience. A pair of Castle Guards waited at each end of the hallway, their silent presence ample warning to any servants in the area to turn the other way.

Julian stood in front of the guards at the north end of the hall, his arms folded in front of his chest.

The Lady Misty watched behind the guards at the southern end of the hall. With her stood another guard, whose hand was placed on her shoulder in a reassuring manner.

Not a one made a move to intervene.

"What is going on?" the Lady asked, loudly enough to be heard clearly over Gérard's bellowing.

Svetaslaf nicked deeply into Kajina's gloves as she took hold of its

blade like a bat, and clocked Gérard on the back of the head with its hilt.

He toppled over, dragging Brand with him, and struck the floor with an impressive thud.

Then, the only sound in the hallway was Brand's labored breathing.

He pried himself from Gérard's lax grip, got up, and massaged his throat gingerly. He grimaced at the contact of bloody fingers on wealed flesh, and wiped his hands on his robes. Adding new stains to them made him appear more disgusted at his current state of disarrangement.

He scowled down at Gérard, and gave him a vicious kick in the head. Only then, did he look around the corridor. His smoldering gaze fixed on Kajina.

She sheathed her sword.

"Inside," he said hoarsely. "The rest of you, go away."

"Brand, I have something you should know," Julian said.

"Right now, I don't care if she's the Unicorn herself. Go."

Julian snorted, uncrossed his arms, and turned to leave. The guards moved aside to let him through.

Kajina followed Brand into his chambers, slammed the heavy door shut behind them.

Vlam was lying face-up on the floor suffering the beginnings of what looked like a hasty autopsy, or perhaps more accurately, a vivisection. Amazingly enough, he still appeared to be breathing.

Brand ignored the gory mess on the floor, and dropped into one of the plush chairs, motioning for Kajina to sit in the one opposite him.

She sat, and folded her hands in her lap. Blood seeped heavily from the thin lines cut into the palms of her gloves, sticking to the steel mesh as it began to scab.

Brand cleared his throat and took a deep breath.

"Now, child," he said, pronouncing each word crisply. "What was it that took you so long?"

She did not cloud the issue by mentioning that His Majesty could do with a bit of medical attention. He undoubtedly realized that.

"I sought to deter and to distract him by inflicting pain, since you had instructed me not to damage him overmuch. When it became apparent that he was not in a deferrable mind set, I took what appeared to be the most efficient way of ceasing his attack on your person, short of running him through."

Several minutes passed while he studied her wordlessly.

There was the faint sound of someone trying the door, but Brand ignored it, and it went away shortly thereafter.

He rose from his chair with a grunt, and went back to his tray of instruments by Vlam's body. He muttered something as he picked

up a scalpel and returned to the business of inspecting Vlam's innards. After cutting a thin slice of liver, he held it up to the light, then looked over at Kajina thoughtfully as if imagining the ways in which her liver might differ.

She sat there quietly, with her hands still folded.

Brand flung the bloody tissue to one side, and got back to his feet, scalpel still in hand.

There was a peculiar sort of glint in his eyes as he approached Kajina, one which reminded her of the headache which had been hovering in the back of her mind since her meeting with Earl Dyvim.

Ever since I remembered being presented to Prince Benedict...

The corner of Brand's mouth twitched, and then his hand holding the scalpel twitched, and then...

Later

Kajina blinked and found herself lying flat on her back in the dark, feeling slightly nauseous, slightly tingly, and quite naked. She stretched out her folded legs, and bumped them quickly into the base of a chair; the armchair in which Brand had been sitting, if she was still in his Chambers.

It felt as if she might have lost four or five hours, making it between eight and nine o'clock at night. Her stomach agreed.

So did the cuts on her hands; they had scabbed over, and the scabs were flaking away from the edges.

There was a pile of objects on the floor beside her. She sat up, and began picking through them.

The first item her fingers contacted was the cool metal not-quite-scaling of her bodysuit. She lifted it away from the pile as silently as she could.

A thought troubled her as she did so.

Perhaps His Majesty would prefer me to remain where and as I was?

Hmm. No orders have been given, so, that is likely not the case.

There was a faint rustling as part of the suit slid over the carpet, then a scraping noise and a dull thump as something fell off it. She leaned forward where she had heard the object fall, and patted around on the rug.

Her hand touched metal a second time. A careful examination showed that what she had contacted was the flat blade of one of her knives.

She got to her feet quietly, and set about donning her suit. She noticed the position of the knife and resolved to get it, once she was dressed and had found her belt.

She made barely a whisper of sound, which was a good thing—otherwise she might have missed the noise of someone trying to open the door, just as she began to pull the suit over her legs.

She considered the situation for a few seconds, all the time it took for her to step out of her suit again, crouch, and retrieve her knife.

Knocking would signal someone with an honest desire to be within the room.

The fingers of her left hand curled easily and securely around the knife hilt, while she patted around on the carpet with her right, searching for another weapon.

The doors of the room, from what she remembered, should have been locked, perhaps even barred, but the sounds did not go away. It was a shame that the doors were thick enough to block all but the loudest noises from outside. On the other hand, they served that purpose admirably.

Within moments, she found a second knife, just as the noises stopped.

Now, who would be stupid enough to break into His Majesty's Chambers?

Gérard came to mind immediately, and was dismissed as being too obvious.

Besides, he would simply try to batter down the door.

As if on cue, there was a loud thud.

Then another.

And again.

Kajina considered slipping behind the armchair, then decided against it. Instead, she stepped quickly and quietly to the right of the door sill. If it was in fact Gérard, his hearing would be impaired from that side.

There was muffled shouting outside, and the thuds stopped abruptly.

Kajina waited silently, reminding herself that His Majesty had not ordered Gérard killed.

A minute passed.

Then two.

She heard nothing further.

Kajina remained in place for three more minutes, listening.

Nothing.

Slowly, quietly, she retraced her steps to where she had left her suit on the floor, and set a dagger on the arm of the chair near it. She kept the other in her hand as she stooped to collect the armor.

Someone put a key into one of the locks. There was a faint -snick- as the lock came undone.

Kajina nodded at the noise, and continued dressing. She knew

that the King was the only one who had all of the keys to his Chambers.

The second lock was unlocked, and the third was being attempted by the time she finished pulling her suit about her. She jerked up her hood, retrieved the dagger from the armchair, and knelt to begin the search for her other belongings. She had found both vambraces and her greaves lying on top of her tabard, as the third lock came open.

The door opened—it was unbarred—blinding her with the light from the corridor. Kajina squinted immediately, trying to focus on shadows until her eyes had adjusted. She did not move to pick up a vambrace, which had been her initial intention.

A voice whined, "But, Milady..." It was the voice of DeSander, the King's Chamberlain.

"Hush, fool. Brand will appreciate this."

Princess Florimel.

Then a gasp, and a "What in the Unicorn's name are you doing here?" followed by a snicker from a third person who had previously been silent.

"One might ask you the same question," Kajina murmured.

As her eyes adjusted, she saw that it was indeed DeSander and the Princess, or at least their silhouettes. There also appeared to be a small troop of servants with them.

"Why, I never—" Flora began. "Geller, order her out of there!"

Kajina balanced the dagger in her left hand on her right thigh, and reached down for the appropriate vambrace, which she buckled on her arm. She picked up the dagger again, and repeated the process with the other arm.

Geller, if he was out of line of sight of the door, didn't say a word. Flora's voice took on a slightly pleading tone.

"Geller?"

"Milady, if I might suggest," Geller ventured.

"Silence! I did not ask your opinion!"

Kajina, now able to use the light from the hallway instead of being blinded by it, glanced around for her boots. She found them, easily, as she did the rest of her possessions, scattered somewhat haphazardly around the room.

She noted that Vlam's body was nowhere to be seen, though there were spots of blood still on the floor.

Kajina straightened from her crouch and collected her boots, which she stepped into before buckling on her greaves. This was done before slipping on her tabard and sword belt, securing Svetaslaf, and finding a home for her knives. Her helm went on last of all. After straightening it on her head, she regarded Florimel impassively. She waited a moment, then flexed her hands within

her injured gloves before resting them akimbo.

Florimel said something in hushed tones. Someone murmured something in return, and she looked back at Kajina.

"Well. Fine. We'll have to work around you, then."

"Were you sent for by His Majesty?" Kajina replied.

DeSander looked up at Flora nervously.

"Get in," she ordered him, pushing him far enough to make him stumble forward. "The rest of you, too."

Kajina drew her sword.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" Flora demanded of the other servants.

The leading maid eyed Kajina, pale-faced, and shivered. DeSander cowered on the carpet, looking thoroughly undignified.

"Were you sent for by His Majesty?" Kajina asked, a little louder.

Did His Majesty ever explicitly forbid me to kill the Princess Florimel?

No, not to my knowledge.

However, it is reasonable, unless circumstances have changed, to assume that He would not be happy to see her too badly damaged.

Flora continued to ignore her. She grabbed the first servant by her hair and a sleeve.

"I said, *get in!*" She threw her bodily into the room. The girl screamed shrilly as she hit the armchair next to Kajina, and broke out into tears when she bounced onto the floor.

The servants behind Flora began to murmur.

Kajina let out a very soft breath.

"I suggest you leave."

Flora started to reach for the second maid, but she ducked her head quickly in a gesture of appeasement. The maid walked stiffly into the room and froze just inside the door frame.

Outside, Geller began to chuckle. Flora glared at him, then looked back at the other servants.

Kajina crouched just enough to take the weeping girl on the floor by her arm and tug her to her feet. The maid stood with Kajina's help, and wiped at her face with the back of her sleeve. Kajina waited until she had finished wiping her face, then released her arm, after giving her an encouraging push toward the doorway.

"Perhaps returning after His Majesty has sent for you would be best."

Flora continued as if she hadn't heard a word Kajina had said.

"Well?" She flexed her fingers. "Who's next?"

The maid stopped in her slow shuffle toward the door.

Kajina's mouth twitched. "Very well."

She slipped Svetaslaf back into its sheath, then took three long strides toward Flora.

Then, she shoved.

Flora tumbled back out of the doorway with an unladylike yelp, crashing into a trolley of buckets and mops. There was a tearing noise as she stood, and a good swath of her dress ripped away.

Kajina's steely gaze swept the servants as she stepped back into the room.

"Out."

Flora looked down at herself, and then at Kajina, expression darkening.

Kajina slipped a dagger out of her belt.

Geller put a hand over his face to keep from laughing.

Kajina set her left hand on the door.

The servants outside in the hallway were frozen in place, though the ones already in the room moved closer to the door, crowding up behind her. She took a side-step to allow them to pass through the door.

DeSander remained a quivering mass on the floor of Brand's chambers.

Flora glared at the servants, and they stopped where they stood.

"No," she ordered.

"If His Majesty wishes for his chambers to be cleaned, He will order it," Kajina stated patiently. She glanced over her shoulder. "DeSander. Get up."

DeSander was too terrified to do anything but cower.

Kajina turned her gaze on the maids. "Get out the door. Now. Take Princess Florimel to obtain a change of clothing."

"Kajina," Flora said. "I am in the process of doing Brand a favor. You are in my way."

Kajina did not look at her. "I am in the process of doing my duty, Princess. You are in mine."

The maids decided Kajina was closer to them than Flora was, and hesitantly started to move out the door.

Flora picked up another maid and threw her backward. The girl bounced off the door in a limp sprawl.

Flora glared at Kajina, and reached for another servant.

Kajina pushed the door a little further closed with her left shoulder, and grabbed at the first maid in the room. She shoved her toward Flora.

Geller started laughing.

The second maid waited passively for Kajina to eject her from the room. Kajina did so, then put both hands to the door, pushing it toward a close.

The maid on the floor was just barely hauled out of the way before the door slammed.

Kajina dropped the bolt.

There was muffled screaming outside, though whether it was Florimel's or the maids', Kajina couldn't tell.

She turned on the cowering DeSander.

"So it seems His Majesty has entrusted you with his Chamber keys, yes?"

He blubbered fearfully.

"Is that a yes or a no?"

His blubbing continued. It was if he was too caught up in his own terror to hear her.

Kajina tucked her dagger away, and rested her arms on her hips. She waited patiently, listening to the noises outside more than to DeSander's blubbing. After a time, the screaming stopped, and the door was tried again, but that stopped, too, rather quickly.

Kajina glanced toward the door, then reached out with her right hand to pick up DeSander and guide him toward it. He calmed somewhat at her touch—or perhaps had gone catatonic. At any rate, he stood and followed her guidance without saying a word.

There was no further noise from the door for the moment.

Two guards were on duty outside the hall. One of them smirked at her briefly after she booted DeSander out the door.

She closed the door behind her, and let the bolt drop, before walking over to right the toppled armchair.

I should have ensured that the bolt was on the door to begin with.

Her stomach grumbled faintly as the chair took her weight.

A while beyond that

The third time Kajina dozed off, someone knocked crisply on the door.

Her eyes flicked open. She forced a swallow to clear her throat.

"Present."

As soon as the word came out of her mouth, she realized that her soft voice would not carry across the room, let alone penetrate the thick door. She got up from her seat, and walked over to stand beside the door sill.

"Yes."

"Caredwen," the muffled voice said. "Open the door, Kajina."

She lifted the bolt, and opened the door a crack. Caredwen looked tired, and somewhat severe. There were three pairs of guards standing in the hallway with him.

"Come out."

"I have not been dismissed."

"I'm dismissing you. Come out."

Kajina nodded slowly. "All right. Have you the keys?"

"Yes. Two of them. Geller has the third. He is occupied. He will

lock the third lock later.”

“Perhaps we should wait until then.”

Caredwen frowned and shook his head. “No, there’s no reason for that. Two locks and six guards should be more than adequate.”

“Very well.”

Kajina stepped out of the room, and pulled the door closed behind her. Her hand rested on its handle until Caredwen locked the door.

He offered her one of the two keys. “Here. DeSander is in no shape to hold any key. You may as well take it. Now, go get something to eat and come to my office when you’re done. You sleep there tonight.”

Kajina slipped the key into her belt.

“Yes, sir,” she murmured. As she turned away, she felt all at once the numbness in her lips and the faint prickles tingling just under the surface of her hands and feet—two definite signs that a meal and a night of unbroken sleep would do her good.

A meal would likely also not hurt Joss, either.

With this in mind, she requisitioned a large bowl of stewed venison and carried it back to her chambers, after eating two in the kitchen and drinking a jug of milk. The kitchen crew worked around her, trying not to look at her as they passed near. She felt their discomfort, but—she was very hungry.

With food in her system, she was clear headed enough to reflect on the few soft giggles she heard coming from around door sills and behind her as she walked toward her chambers, but she correlated nothing to it. They were noises, nothing more.

However, there was something to the noises to the corridor in front of her chambers. They belonged to a half-dozen guards. If there was any question about what they were guarding, that question would have been answered by a look at Kajina’s chamber door—or what was left of it. A bright red cord was draped across the splintered door frame, signaling that the scene was under investigation.

The guards snapped to attention when Kajina entered their eyesight, and remained that way. Not one spoke, or moved to hinder her as she walked up to the doorway. This was perhaps fortunate.

She stopped on the door’s threshold, just on the outside of the cord. The sway of her tabard set the slender rope swinging.

It was a number of years ago for a moment.

Only there was no present waiting to make it all better.

Kajina’s cold grey gaze registered the pieces of the maid strewn around the room. Registered only. She did not consider the corpse anything other than litter cluttering the landscape of her murdered dolls.

All of them had been smashed, except for the cloth ones. Those

had been ripped apart, and their stuffing strewn across the room. Doll houses, books, clothing, all ruined. The contents of her cabinets, even the locked ones, had been dumped onto the floor and subjected to the same fate as everything else.

Her numb lips parted.

Where is Joss?

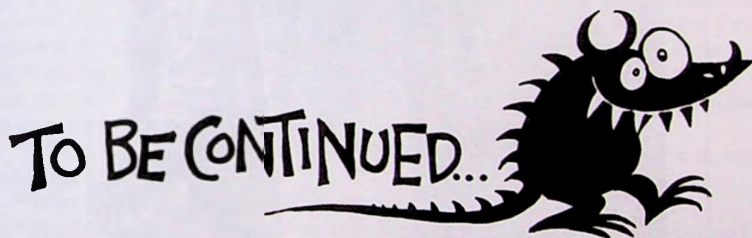
Kajina did not quite remember giving one of the guards the bowl of venison, but upon reflection several minutes later realized that she must have, for he offered them back to her when she re-emerged from her chambers and tied the cord back in place.

Neither did she recall much of her search inside, other than that she came away with the impression that Joss was gone. Dead, she didn't know. Alive, she didn't know.

Gone.

Just gone.

The tall, thin guard blanched when she looked at him directly. "Kitty cat gone," she lisped.





Random Chance

Beck's Diary

by Martin Sutherland

A diary, based on a campaign by Karen Francis

"Caine? Caine? Snap out of it, man!" I waved my hand in front of his face, but his eyes didn't track. He just continued to stare straight ahead, his mouth slightly open, his jaw slack.

"It's no use, Beck," Bleys said to me. "Don't you think I've tried all that already?" I turned away from the once proud figure, Caine, now slouched limply in a leather chair, and faced my other uncle.

"He doesn't hear, he doesn't see," Bleys continued. "Hell, I can't even tell if he's still in there anywhere." Bleys leaned on the back of a chair next to the table at the center of the Great Hall with one arm akimbo. His mobile lips somehow managed to sneer and curl down at the corners simultaneously.

I have never really liked my uncle Bleys, and he has certainly shown no signs of being overly fond of me either. This usually kept our relationship straightforward and simple, with a minimum of conversation and hassle, but since we had returned from the Primal Pattern he had been downright hostile towards me. Right now I had the feeling that blame was about to be apportioned, and that I was first in line. I squared myself up for a battle of words, and decided to get my own opening shot in first.

"What's your problem, Bleys?" I asked. He narrowed his eyes and took one step forward.

"Why don't you tell me?" he replied.

"Here's how I see it: your psychic metaconcert was destroyed and when you came around I was already standing. You have no way of knowing what I saw or did while you were out cold, and that makes you nervous."

"The blast knocked out Julian and Fiona as well. Maybe I just don't see how you could have weathered it without knowing it was coming. And that makes me suspicious."

"Apparently I'm tougher than you think," I said. He smiled, and took another step closer to me. I made a warding gesture with my hands. "Don't try me, Bleys. Not now." I caught a glimpse of movement off to my right and glanced round to see Julian

approaching. I tried not to show the relief I felt. I'm a few inches taller than Bleys, and I'm no slouch in a fight, but he could probably cut me into very small pieces indeed. There had been a momentary flicker of doubt in his eyes, however, when I made those hand movements. They were a bluff, but I was happy to let him wonder.

"Do me the courtesy of listening to my story," I said. "There is a lot at stake here, and I think you would benefit from hearing me out."

"There's more at stake than you think," he growled. He crossed his arms, lifted his chin and regarded me expectantly. That caught me slightly off guard: I had expected him to argue a little longer. I looked round at Julian, who stood to my right, leaning easily on a large sword. He lifted an eyebrow at me. Fiona sat on a window seat about forty feet behind him, looking out into the gardens, her body facing slightly away from us. My heart did a quick leap as I followed the delicate curve her red hair made as it spilled down the smooth skin of her neck and over her back, left bare by the cut of her green dress.

As I turned back to face Bleys, I saw her head turning towards us. Damn! I couldn't look over that way again without revealing the fact that I was interested in her. And I was interested - I just wasn't sure how much of that interest I should show. I so longed to see that smile of hers again. Oh, auntie...

"Well?" prompted Bleys.

"Well," I began...

Being Amber's ambassador to the Courts of Chaos means that one is frequently considered to be an honorable, and sufficiently impartial, observer to adjudicate in matters of inter-House politics. Sometimes this is a pleasure: I enjoy helping people to make agreements that are advantageous to all concerned. More often, however, it is a pain. This time I was sitting at the top of a crescent shaped table with Sawalls on my left and Hendrakes on my right. And none of them were being cooperative.

"You cannot be serious!" Baron Beltane (Sawall) roared at me. "We have been at this table for three turnings now, and this is the best you can come up with?" His rotund torso swelled up even further and he looked like he was about to explode. His wife, Lady Catcom, raised herself from her seat and tugged gently at his arm. Her demon form was about as grotesque as they get, with quivering tentacles hanging down from what could have been a nose or a very deformed eyeball - but I was not there to judge a beauty contest.

Viscount Happe (Hendrake) and his wife Happeta sat quietly at the opposite horn of the crescent table. In their human forms, they both looked thin and ascetic, with grey skin. Neither of them had

been anything but somber throughout the whole proceedings. Happe's cold eyes caught mine. He pursed his lips with an I-told-you-he-wouldn't-go-for-it look on his face.

"Baron," I spoke calmly, addressing the balloon-like figure. "If your situations were reversed, I am sure that in your wisdom you would consider this offer to be more than generous."

"But they aren't," he snapped back at me. "And besides, my son is worth more than that."

That remark touched a fine nerve in me. "Might I remind you that you are not selling your son? We are discussing the size of the dowry his future wife may bring with her." I glanced at the Viscount and his wife. Their daughter, Preona Happenana Hendrake, was due to be married to Pulgato Sawall in just over a hundred turnings. I knew the Baron's son Pulgato well. He was a fine young man, and I kept wondering if he might have been adopted by Beltane and Catcom. The alternative possibility, that he was a genuine blood relation of the increasingly zeppelin-shaped Baron to my left, was seeming less and less likely. "I am concerned that the distinction between the two forms of negotiation may have escaped you."

"How dare you talk to me like that!"

"I dare because I am more interested in your son's happiness than in stroking your gassed-up ego!" I resisted the temptation to wag my finger at him. "Do you think that Preona is going to warm to you because you have squeezed her parents dry to provide her with some measure of wealth? It may come as a shock to you, but she is not marrying Pulgato for money."

I turned to face the Viscount and his wife, and saw that for the first time in these proceedings they had dropped their grim visages and were holding their heads up high. Their branch of the family had struggled through some bad times recently, but I could see some of the ancient Hendrake pride shining through now. They weren't interested in cash or land. And as the negotiations had centered on precisely those two matters, it was suddenly clear to me why they had been so distant.

After having tugged on her husband's sleeve for several minutes, Lady Catcom abruptly switched to brute force and yanked the Baron back down into his seat. He whipped his head round and opened his mouth wide to shout something, but was silenced before he could start by the look on her inhuman face. Even I, who couldn't figure out where (or what) her eyes were, recognized it as a show-stopper.

Her voice was a hissing gurgle: "I speak for both my husband and myself when I say that this offer is acceptable." Beltane's eyes bulged and looked like they would pop out. What looked like a grim smile crossed his wife's face, and the Baron deflated.

He looked at me with small, sullen red eyes, and went "Hmmp." Three to one in favor, with the one opponent neatly removed from play. I raised my eyebrows and sighed contentedly.

"Well then," I said. "Perhaps we should move on to formalizing this agreement. It might be..." I was interrupted by a soft knock on the door to the meeting room. It opened, and my junior secretary Malti stepped quietly into the chamber. She bowed to the collected nobles. Baron Beltane muttered "Rat's Belch" just loudly enough for me to hear. I would not have been surprised to find him sticking his tongue out at me.

"The King requests your presence, Sir," Malti said to me, stepping over to my side. She nodded her head in emphasis. Which King? I wondered. Unless Random had travelled all the way out here himself, he would have contacted me by Trump. Merlin, on the other hand, knows that I prefer not to receive Trump calls while I'm in sensitive meetings. And as Pulgato is an old friend of his, he would have known that I was right in the middle of one. He also would never have had the meeting interrupted unless what he wanted to say was extremely urgent. I returned Malti's nod and she slipped back out through the door, closing it noiselessly behind her.

"It might be an idea to take a short break," I said smoothly. "We're all a little tired, and it looks like we have reached a convenient resting point. I have taken note of the current agreement, and can have a formal contract drawn up for, say, next redsky?" Happe and Happeta nodded courteously in response to this suggestion, and Beltane just nodded. Lady Catcom had resumed her silent, docile subsidiary role, and her expression was completely unreadable to me again. Well, well.

"Fine, then," I said as I stood up and swept my papers together into a blue folder. The Viscount was the first to rise after that, and I all but ran from the room before the fake pleasantries started.

Although I had just drastically revised my opinions of all four people there, I had no intention of hanging around to swap ideas about the wedding itself. Pulgato and Preona had insisted upon making all those arrangements themselves. Unless they eloped, however, the possibility of their retaining that autonomy was, sadly, remote. I didn't want to think about the arguments there would be over the decorations.

I made my way quickly out of the maze of conference rooms adjacent to the Embassy, and struck out towards Merlin's private den. The only time we get together anywhere else but his den or my study at the Embassy is at official functions, and instinct told me that this was no official function.

At the edge of the Embassy's grounds, I passed through a shimmering veil of a Way out onto a wide green plain. Far in the

hazy distance, mile-high skyscrapers tickled the underside of a band of mauve clouds. A gentle Way eddied around me like a delicate breeze, and the skyscrapers were replaced by equally tall orange trees. The gigantic forest was still many miles away, but when I turned around, I found the familiar, single colossus standing just a hundred yards from me. It towered over me like a mountain-sized pencil, a hundred meters in diameter at its base. Its branches and leaves didn't start till well over half-way up its massive trunk.

I walked past a dandelion the size of a house to a thin crack in the great tree's base and knocked once, twice, three times on ancient wood. The bark split open to reveal a staircase spiralling down into the ground. Light was supplied by luminescent yellow globes on the walls, one every seven stairs. I stepped inside and the bark closed silently behind me. It was a long way down.

The apparent bottom of the staircase was a flat layer of polished lavender crystal. I did not halt my descent, but instead carried on straight down through the crystal. I knew it was a Way; and from what little Merlin had told me about it, I was aware that it was also a semi-sentient computer which scanned me and sent warning ahead to him in his den. There were another ten stairs before a short corridor which ended at a metal door. "Come on in, Beck," a voice hollered, and I pushed the door open.

Merlin was leaning back in his favorite armchair, surrounded by banks of computer, video and hi-fi equipment from a dozen different shadows. He wore faded jeans and a purple shirt, and tapped away at a small keyboard in his lap. I hadn't changed after the meeting, and I felt overdressed in a rough and tired kind of way. I took off my jacket and loosened my tie. A blank monitor acted as mirror. My glasses were crooked (I reflexively straightened them), my hair was all over the place, and I was sure that the patches of grey at the temples had spread since I last looked. Sometimes I wonder if my father, Eric, didn't dye his hair to keep it that glossy black, because I was on course for a head of brilliant silver by the time I hit forty. My shirt and trousers looked as if I'd been wrestling in them. I brushed ineffectively at the wrinkles, running my hand along the top of my thigh in search of a crease.

"You're looking fine, man," Merlin assured me with a weary smile, and I grinned back. Images of foreign places flickered on the screens behind him. Some of the locations I recognized as being in the courts and I could hazard a guess at others; but most of them were complete mysteries to me. Merle is one of the best friends I have, but he has started to play his cards a lot closer to his chest than he used to. Good for him.

The two of us first met just after the Patternfall War. I'd be a liar if I said that I didn't pump him for all the information he had about

the Courts. Somehow, though, we became real friends, and I discovered that I didn't have it in me to break his trust. I could have speeded up the peace negotiations between Amber and Chaos quite considerably with the knowledge I had acquired, but I chose not to. My discretion has paid for itself many times over since then.

When Merlin went to that Shadow Earth to study, he turned into the exact opposite of his former self. He became secretive and closed, never told anyone anything, and trusted no one. From what I hear, he turned into a bit of a pain in the ass, but I didn't see much of him during those years. When he was made King, he finally discovered that he was not in complete control of his own destiny, and that shook him up a bit. I think he has matured greatly. He has become a lot more like his father: fun-loving and a great party guy when he has the chance, but thoughtful and emotional, even a touch melancholy at heart. He has started to write some pretty good poetry. Oh, and of course, don't piss him off. He is not the kind of guy you would want mad at you, even if he weren't King of Chaos.

Merlin swung the chair round, got up and started pacing a figure-of-eight path on the dark parquet floor. Merlin rarely fidgets, and I knew at once that he was really worried.

"It's my mother. She hasn't been well lately."

"Nothing too serious, I hope?" I mouthed my concerns, but held back to see what the real problem was. Merlin wouldn't have called me out here just to say Princess Dara had a bad cold.

"I suppose it depends on your point of view. You know about her antipathy towards Amber, don't you." He stated this, rather than putting it as a question. I nodded. Wanting to see Amber and all its inhabitants and Shadows wiped out like day-old chalk on a blackboard could be seen as a slight antipathy.

"Her illness seems to have taken the form of an increased tendency towards depression, incoherence, irrationality and violent outbursts. She almost ripped Glasbey's head off the other day. I saw her! She didn't recognize him. Just yelled 'traitor!' and lunged for his throat." Glasbey was Dara's secretary. It was he that I dealt with instead of her, and I liked the man. I gritted my teeth, as I could see what this was leading up to.

"She's gone psycho, Beck. And she's on the loose. We've lost all trace of her. Even Ghost is drawing a blank."

"And you think she's heading for Amber?"

"Last time I saw her she shouted 'This is all your father's fault!' and tried to fry me with a lightning bolt."

"Uh-oh."

"Yeah, my thoughts exactly. Look, I would really appreciate it if you could let Random know. Just a word in his ear to warn him that trouble might be heading his way."

"Why can't you just Trump him yourself?"

Merlin's face crinkled like he'd taken a big bite of a juicy lemon. "You know Random still thinks of me as a kid. This is really my affair, and I don't want to give him the idea that I can't take care of my own problems."

"But you can handle this, can't you?"

"Sure. It's just a matter of time before we track her down. Mom needs some rest, a holiday or something. She needs a steady intravenous drip of Pina Colada on a quiet beach with some good night-life." Merlin snapped his fingers idly while he paced, something I'd never seen him do before. Why was I not reassured?

"You're not telling me something, Merle. Cough it up." He stopped walking and faced me. His eyes seemed to measure me up, weighing possibilities for a few moments, then his face set in a determined frown.

"You don't need to know."

"That's it? 'You don't need to know'? You're so knotted up you can hardly tell left from right! Come on, tell me, I can help."

"Just trust me on this, OK? There's nothing you can do." He was about to say something more when he was interrupted by a soft chime. Four of the central video screens behind him switched to show various views of a white-haired man in black cautiously descending the stairs I had come down earlier to reach this place.

A silky feminine voice spoke up, though her words came from no particular direction: "Subject, Mandor. Apparent weapons, none. Logrus field strength, 409.7 milliLog at source. Five spells hung, two Culinary, one Rapid Confusing Retreat, two Offensive, Generic Hyperintrusive Class. Four spheres in waistcoat pockets, 1" diameter each, alloy unknown; magical shielding activated, analysis inconclusive. Subject is carrying fifty-eight Trumps, two used within the last fifteen minutes; do you want a full read-out?" I suddenly felt exposed and naked, knowing that I must have been exposed to a similar scan myself when I arrived here. I hadn't realized that the scanning apparatus was so thorough.

"That won't be necessary, Sonya," Merlin said. "Stand by." His eyes hadn't left mine.

"You've made some improvements to her since I was last here," I commented. He shook his head to stop me from changing the subject.

"Please, Beck." There is a time for giving orders, and there's a time for taking them. It was obvious what time Merlin thought it was, and I made an exaggerated display of mulling over his request before nodding and saying, "Oh, all right," at the same time as Mandor knocked.

We were standing near to the door, and Merlin placed his hand

on the handle. "Remember: this meeting didn't happen," he said.

"And I was never here. Yeah, right." I reached past him and grabbed my jacket from the hook I'd hung it on. I slung it over my shoulder as Merlin opened the door for Mandor. Mandor did a quick double-take when he saw me standing there with his half-brother, probably wondering exactly what Merle had told me, and whether this would affect him in any way.

"Highness," I said to him with a brief bow. "I was just leaving." He stepped into the room, and I stepped out. Without bothering to return my greeting, he took Merlin by the elbow and manoeuvred him away from the door. He looked back at me with a steely glare. I ducked out of the doorway, deciding not to overstay my welcome. I placed my right foot on the first step of the staircase, and paused, considering whether or not to hang around and eavesdrop. The door was still open. Mandor's grave tone carried through into the hallway, but I couldn't make out his words. Better not.

As I took my second step, I heard Merlin yelp, "Oh shit!" Without thinking, I turned around and rushed back into the room, only to see the two figures already clouded in a rainbow haze. They faded and disappeared, having Trumped out to who-knows-where. Perhaps I should have pressed Merlin a bit harder on what he was holding back from me, because I had a feeling that horrible things were about to happen.

I paused. Bleys looked at me skeptically, his arms crossed in front of him. "Gosh," he said, his tone dripping with sarcasm. "You're really quick on the uptake, aren't you?" I felt color and heat rise in my cheeks, despite my best attempts to keep calm.

"Perhaps I made some errors of judgement," I said. "But you know I was not the only one." My tongue felt thick, and my head felt heavy. There was a pitcher of water on the table, and I poured myself a glass. I took a few long sips and revelled in the water's clear, sweet coolness. For a moment my mind felt brilliantly clear, as if a fog I hadn't realized was there had suddenly lifted. I blinked at the glass and swayed a bit.

Julian must have thought I was about to fall over, because his hand suddenly snapped out and grabbed my shoulder, steadying me. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"Yes, I'm fine," I replied. The brief flash had passed. I was tired, but there was no way I was going to rest until I had told the rest of my story. "Just a spot of vertigo. It's been a tough day." I gave him a half-smile. He seemed satisfied with this explanation.

What had I just thought? I had seen something there, beneath the fog, but now it was gone. I rubbed my forehead and my eyes.

When I looked over to Bleys again, I noticed someone standing about twenty feet behind him. It was Llewella. The last time I saw her she was shackled up in a room with some blond-haired hunk of manhood, giggling like a schoolgirl. She looked at me with deep eyes, her face somber. How long had she been there? Had she been listening to us?

Bleys glanced over his shoulder and gave her a brief nod before turning his attention back towards me. Something was wrong, something with the world, or with me, but I couldn't put my finger on it.

Llewella drew closer, joining our little circle, but staying just out of Bleys' and Julian's reach. My gaze swept languorously over to the window seat where Fiona had been sitting earlier, but she was no longer there. Vaguely, my mind registered disappointment like a...

...vivid memory of walking back up the stairs from Merlin's den. Curiously unfazed by my train of thought's derailing, I cocked my head and turned round to face Julian. As he watched me intently, I became slowly aware that I was already talking.

I passed through the green fields of summer, heading back towards the Embassy. Mandor's visit to Merlin and their quick exit could have been completely unrelated to the matter of Princess Dara's "ill health," but I doubted it. So assuming that those events were related, what could have warranted such a quick getaway?

Perhaps Dara had been located, and they didn't want her to escape them again. That was a plausible scenario. Or she might have caused some trouble, which Merlin and Mandor were anxious to undo. Hmm. That was also possible, but it didn't have the same sense of urgency to it. I decided to call Jason, my head of security, to see what he thought of all this. Despite Merlin's assurances that I am under his personal protection, and thus have no need for private guards, I nonetheless feel happier and generally better informed with my own people taking care of internal security.

Jason's Trump showed as a tall, well-muscled man wearing camouflage gear, heavy boots and a green beret set at a slight angle. It is only upon closer examination that some of his more remarkable features become apparent. His eyes are a piercing crystal blue, but still manage to look mellow and friendly. His hair is a silvery blond, cut short to match the military look. An ostrich feather decorates the beret. On his right ring finger he wears a heavy gold ring, a souvenir from some time he spent on the same Shadow Earth as Merlin. He has an aura of restrained power around him and from experience I know that that power can be unleashed to devastating effect.

At first I felt nothing as I concentrated on the Trump, but this nothingness gradually made way for a questing feeling, as if the Trump was methodically searching Shadow after Shadow for a trace of Jason. I guessed that he was probably some distance away, possibly even back in Amber. Trumps can be quite erratic over such long distances. On impulse I pulled out Random's Trump to see if it might work instead. I had no idea what I would say to him if I got through, but I was sure I could improvise something.

I stared at his picture, and again felt that great nothingness. This time, though, it was replaced by a greenish tinge at the edge of my field of vision. I had never experienced or even heard of anything like it. I found it even stranger and more disturbing when I tried to pull away from it and found that it was drawing me further into the contact. "Random!" I called. It might have been just my imagination, but I felt someone at the other end of the contact... not Random, though.

The green light was all around me. Like a whirlpool it spiralled, tugging me towards its center. My initial shock at the effect subsided, to be replaced by a comforting relief at the happy verdant swirls now obscuring my view of the Trump in my hand. There was no need to worry anymore: I could just swing along with that jazzy melody playing faintly in the distance. If I concentrated for a moment I could probably make out what the tune was... As I narrowed my eyes and tuned my ears to the music, my mind flashed through a point of focus and out the other side again like a telescope on a hair-trigger.

Stop. Back up. Catch that thought.

Letting myself be tugged into the now rather fiery green didn't seem like such a good idea any more. I couldn't see Random's Trump for the pyrotechnic wall, but I still had control of my sense of touch. I placed my free hand over the face of the card, but the contact was too strong to be broken by such simple means. Exerting all my will, I tried to pull free with brute mental force. There was some movement, but not enough. It was as if someone had someone had sprayed my brain with superglue. The harder I pulled, the stronger it bonded and the more it hurt to maintain any effort against the force on the other end of the Trump contact. At least the pain served to remind me that I was trying to break loose.

There was one last trick I hadn't tried: a piece of mental judo my father had taught me when he gave me my first Trumps. I must use the force to my own advantage. I must lean with it, then slip under it...just so. My right shoulder hunched and my left leg straightened up abruptly in a physical reflection of the mental process. The force gave way with a brilliant flash, leaving me somewhat stunned and uncertain on my feet.

The green waves withdrew to the corners of my eyes. What in Shadow had caused that weird contact? I was certain that it hadn't been Random on the other side of the Trump link. For me, Trumps had never been more than a handy way of keeping in touch with the rest of the family, and a useful mode of transport. Now it seemed that I might have to re-evaluate those opinions.

I looked around to re-orient myself. Cyan hills, magenta plain, yellow trees... good. I was near the Embassy. I picked a hill in the distance and started to run towards it. The air was fresh and autumnal, and smelled of freshly burned leaves. I breathed deeply as my body settled into a running rhythm. My legs pumped, my heart thumped, pushing away the last remnants of the contact. I could almost feel the blood circulating through my veins, irrigating my muscles, refreshing the parts that other bodily fluids just can't reach.

A sharply defined narrow valley dipped down to my right, a slow trickle of water running along the bottom of it. A rickety suspension bridge crossed over the ravine about a quarter of a mile away.

The bridge was made of sighing wood. It heaved and panted under my feet as I thumped over it. The effect was disconcerting, but I only had to endure it for half of the bridge's span, as there was a Way half-way across it. It parted like a curtain and deposited me on a yellow-paved road. I jogged along the path for a few hundred yards until I reached a cottage that appeared to be made of gingerbread. Its yellow door, however, was quite solid and slid open at my touch. I entered and stood in the Amber Embassy's main antechamber.

"Lord Beck," a voice to my left said. I looked round and found Algernon, Jason's lieutenant, standing in the doorway that led out into the reception hall. He was wearing a black suit and carrying a stack of papers.

"Algie," I said. "have you see Jason around?"

"Not recently, Sir," he replied. "Perhaps I can be of service instead?"

"Perhaps. I have heard from a reliable source that Princess Dara has not been well of late. What else can you tell me?"

"Well, for the past few weeks she was being treated at Duke Nachtel of Elduin's private medical facility. She checked herself out at yellowsky three turnings ago, though. Her private secretary has had an unfortunate accident since then. We are assuming that these events are not unrelated."

"I need more. Something has gone down within the last hour or two. See what you can get me."

"Do you know who or what might be involved?"

"Aren't you supposed to tell me that?" I asked, not entirely jokingly.

"Yes, sir!" Algernon yipped as he ducked through the door. I shook my head and took the same exit a few seconds later.

My own rooms are at the top of the Embassy, with a view out over castles, candyfloss scaffolding, impromptu spires and other, less conventional forms of architecture. Anywhere else, this colossal conurbation would be a city, perhaps even a capital. Here in Chaos, however, it grew and changed and drifted without ever acquiring a name or even an underlying cultural identity. Any direction you take will bring you to the Rim sooner or later, and out there the Abyss is a close and omnipresent sensation of chilly emptiness.

My maid had left the French doors open and the green silk drapes billowed in the warm breeze. With a fresh white travelling shirt in my hand, I drew back the curtains and took a step outside. The air was deliciously moist and enveloping after the air-conditioned rigor of the Embassy proper.

In the distance a flock of Demons flew past a mile-high fountain. Their dark shapes appeared red against the black half of the sky. The front half of the flock banked sharply and split off into the distance while the rest carried on parallel to the horizon.

As I was shrugging off my jacket, I heard a squawking voice above me: "Providence!" I looked up and behind me. A large bird fluttered down to perch on the sharp ears of a gargoyle just above my head. It clapped its beak and ruffled its tail feathers a bit before fixing me with a beady eye and saying, "Poikilothermic?"

"Warm-blooded, actually," I said.

"Plenipotentiary?" It poked its yellow beak under its left wing and straightened a few feathers there.

"Indeed," I replied.

"Portent." More clapping of its beak.

"Are you?"

"Perhaps."

I laughed. This bird, whatever it was, appeared to have a sense of humor. "Why are you here?" I asked.

"Promulgation!" it cried.

"Enlighten me."

"Power," it said, then paused. "Postulate pyrrhic pain."

"And what am I supposed to make of that?"

"Pusillanimous?" it asked, slyly, I thought.

"No," I replied seriously.

"Pursue! Pursue! Pursue!" It shrieked and flapped up into the air.

"Pursue what?" I called after it, but it did not turn back or reply. I was left standing alone on the balcony. I slung my jacket over my shoulder and leaned out over the railing. For a moment I saw the jutting towers of Castle Amber outlined against the sky to my right,

but as my eyes adjusted to the light in that direction I saw that it was just an unusual cloud formation. Amber does not cast its Shadows quite this far. A twinge of homesickness shivered through my guts.

I hate omens.

"Pursue," I repeated to myself. And pursue I would, even though I didn't know quite what I would be chasing. Merlin was mightily worried that Dara had gone off the deep end, and wanted me to contact Random. So I tried to contact Random and almost got sucked into a plush green trap. And now a dark bird of potentially perilous portent? It was definitely time to head back home to the Center of All Things: Amber.

I plucked a hat from the rack beside the chaise-lounge and grabbed my riding coat from the stand behind the door before taking my leave of my chambers. I felt almost jaunty as I skipped down the long spiral staircase towards the main offices. Knowing that I was going to be leaving this place, at least for while, gave me a boost of energy. It had been ages since my last holiday; and as I was bearing with me a message from the King of Chaos to the King of Amber, I could even claim that I was on legitimate ambassadorial business. Gérard would probably grill me about why I didn't simply send a messenger, but I could handle that. I would make sure to stop off in a nice and sunny Shadow just before Amber and pick up a few bottles of wine for him.

I almost bumped into Connor, my senior secretary as I rounded the corner at the bottom of the stairwell. He looked as if he was about to head up the stairs. "Lord Beck, Sir," he said after taking a step back and regaining his balance. I could tell by his tone that the news he had for me was not good.

"I'm heading back to Amber for a few days, Connor," I said, smiling. "Take care of things in my absence."

"But Sir," he sputtered, a blush rising from his neck to the top of his fast-receding hairline. "Count Zotl has just declared bloodfeud on all of House Helgram! You have to talk him out of it, or else he'll be dead before the next Sky!"

I leaned over to bring my head down to Connor's level. He twitched a smile on and off in a stuttering digital pattern. "I trust you, Connor," I said. "I am entirely confident that you will be able to defuse the situation." He whimpered and shrank back even further. I sighed and considered leaving him to deal with it on his own. Connor is a highly competent man, but he is not exactly ten-for-ten in the self-confidence department. I couldn't do it. "Zotl declares the most ridiculous things on everyone from time to time," I said. "He's an old man, and all he wants is someone to pay attention to him, to make him feel like he is still important enough to be made a fuss over."

"Take Malti with you. She came with me the last time, when he declared war on Amber. I think he likes her." I touched my lips with a finger as I swept past him. "But don't tell her that."

Algernon was waiting for me in the next hallway. He got up out of a chair as soon as I passed round the corner. "Sir," he said, striding towards me. When he reached me he turned around smartly and matched my pace as I walked swiftly towards the stables at the back of the building.

"What news, lieutenant?" I asked.

"You were right about something having happened in the last few hours," he said. "Lord Suhuy was attacked. Quite viciously. His condition is critical, and the King is with him now."

"Shit," I said. "So that's it. Any word on his assailant?"

"Unconfirmed reports of a tall, thin woman, with further descriptions fitting Princess Dara. If it was her, she was not burning on all six cylinders: two of the fourteen casualties survived, though they are still unconscious. I had to pull in quite a few favours to get the details this quickly, sir."

"Well done. I appreciate it. Any speculations about motive?" I paused at the stables doors.

"None beyond the usual inter-house politics and vendettas, Sir. If it was the Princess, she may have been trying to kill Suhuy, but failed. Another possibility is that she wanted something from him and succeeded in getting it. He may have put up a fight but backed off before he actually got killed. I have a man on the inside, and we should know more as soon as Suhuy wakes up. But that could be some time yet, sir."

"Good work," I said. "I'm leaving for Amber now. As Jason isn't here, you have the con, lieutenant." Algernon nodded with a curt smile. I suspected that this was the first time he had reached this rung on the responsibility ladder. "You know the drill, if something should go wrong?"

"Admit nothing, deny everything, act surprised, and show concern, Sir."

"Good man," I grinned as I stepped through the door.

The stables were quiet. Dust particles shimmered in the dusky light trickling through the windows. I selected a trim grey filly whose name was Swift and reacquainted myself with her. She happily licked up a few lumps of sugar I had grabbed from a box just inside the door, and nudged me affectionately. I saddled her up while she whinnied a few good-byes to her neighbours.

My Trumps were in the inside pocket of my coat, and I rifled through them to find the one depicting the ancient half-way mark between Order and Chaos. Travelling all the way from Chaos to Amber in one leap can be quite a strain, even for the most prodigious

of mental talents. I also wanted some time to ride and think, so I decided to walk through Shadow at least part of the way. With this in mind, I trumped to Ygg.

Swift did not like the atmosphere we found there, on the other side of the Trump. She pounded on the ground with her front feet and shook her head against my rein. The change in temperature was dramatic. Tendrils of cold fog clung to Ygg's branches and a chill twilight breeze made its way down my neck and straight into my bones. The path underfoot made unpleasant sucking noises as I directed Swift upwards and closer to the great tree.

"How flies the crow?" I said to no-one in particular at the point where the path passed its trunk. I had heard from several reliable sources that Ygg was sentient and actually spoke on occasion, but it had never said anything to me before. I couldn't resist trying to engage it in conversation, though.

"Hither and yon, but always straightly," came the sonorous answer. I raised my eyebrows in surprise and pulled Swift to a halt. "Tis a long while since anyone last passed this way."

"It must be pretty lonely out here on your own," I observed.

"I'm only a tree. Why should I care?" The innermost thoughts of flora had never really been at the top of my 'must examine more closely' list.

"I hadn't thought of it that way."

"Of course not. A man of your stature has more important things to worry about. You are heading North, then?"

"Yes, North and home. Do you know me?"

"I know your kind. There are but few who travel this road."

"And the road itself, is it passable?"

"I do not see very far ahead or behind. I only watch the border." The border between Chaos and Order. When travelling from one to the other it is hard to say where one ends and the other begins. It is debatable whether such a boundary truly exists. But people certainly thought there was, and it looked like Ygg itself did, too.

I shrugged. There seemed little point in entering into a philosophical discussion about the nature and edges of reality with a tree, and I didn't have anything else to say to it. "Perhaps I will pass this way again, some day," I said.

"We may talk some more, then," it replied. "Good day, traveller." I nodded and spurred Swift on. She kicked her feet in the mud and wasted no time in climbing out of the small depression in which the great old tree stood. I looked back once before we passed out of sight, and watched grey fog roll up to Ygg's base and retreat again, like a slow, gaseous tide. The bleakness of the setting made me shiver, and reminded me that I was still far from home.

We skirted the base of a low hill, and I started to shuffle the

Shadows. First of all, I wanted to get some vegetation. The barrenness of the landscape was really getting to me. A small shrub around the next corner... done. More followed.

The path we took through the forest led us uphill. A leafy canopy blocked out most of the light, and the temperature dropped several degrees. I decided that I wanted something more open and a bit warmer, and the green ceiling peeled itself back around the next corner. The sky was a darker blue, and there was a wisp of dark smoke up ahead as well. I drew Swift to a halt at the centre of a small clearing as I watched the smoke wind its way upwards, curling and drifting like a paper boat on a river. It was pretty, but it probably also meant that there was a small fire just over the next hill.

We moved on, and I shifted the fire out of our way. The smoke dissolved in the air like snow before the sun, and we continued on our way.

Until it came back. The rising black clouds were denser this time, and they appeared more suddenly. They were drifting over in our direction, and it wasn't long before Swift could smell the fire. She shook her head and snorted. Our path brought us to a rocky ledge at the top of the hill we had been climbing for the last few miles. The view from it was stunning: a wide valley, filled with a fractal patchwork blanket of bubbling red flames and cool jade trees. It looked as if someone had poured a drum of oil over a deep mountain lake and set fire to it. I was surprised at how little smoke it actually produced. And there was absolutely no way we could get to the other side of it.

I turned Swift around and headed back downhill again for a while, until the path turned. Cutting the corner of our path through Shadow, the trail turned uphill again. Swift whinnied. I looked up and saw a sea of black smoke billowing overhead. It seemed to be coming from ahead, but I had specifically shifted Shadow out of the fire's way.

Obviously, my move had not worked. The inferno had to span a whole range of Shadows, and taking the direct way through them would be difficult, if not impossible.

I heard the fire before I smelled it this time. It was a great roar, increasing in volume and lowering in tone as it approached us—quite rapidly, too, by the sound of it. A speedy exit was in order. I turned Swift round again, and spurred her on into a gallop just as the flames burst down the path behind us. A wave of choking heat rolled over us, and I coughed. That exit would have to be speedy.

I directed Swift off the trail and through the trees and undergrowth, as I manipulated Shadow to thin out the greenery. That would slow the fire down a bit, but I needed something more as

well... Rain, rain! We darted left, then right as the trees took up less and less space... As a result the light brushwood thickened, and I felt the fire gain on us, but I could see the grey clouds taking their place in the sky alongside the black pits of smoke that wafted overhead. And it wasn't long before I felt the first drops of water on my face.

The rain came down slowly at first, then in great waves, causing great symphonies of steam to hiss and boil through the forest behind us. I was completely drenched in less than a minute, cold and shivering, but with an exhilarated grin on my face for having outrun the fire.

Swift slowed down of her own accord and whinnied uncomfortably. I patted her on the neck and spoke some reassuring words. She calmed down fairly quickly, and wandered over to a thickly overhanging tree, where we found some shelter. The patter of the rain on the leaves above us rose out of the background white noise from the rest of the forest. A veritable waterfall of run-off raced down and splashed away in great moving puddles a few metres away from us.

I got down from Swift's back and opened one of her saddle bags to get at our rations. I also dug out a light green poncho from the bottom of the bag and pulled it over my head. I hungrily devoured a ham sandwich and gave Swift a few handfuls of oats. She munched them up quickly, and we were soon on our way again.

I decided to push on through the rain for a while longer, to make sure that we had completely circumvented the fire, but when the thunderstorm started, I wasn't sure if that had been such a good idea after all. The rain continued to pelt down and lightning flashed and crackled around us. Swift did not appreciate this turn of events either.

A different direction, then. Striking out into Shadow on a tangent of my imagination, the mental image of a Flatland square flipping into a third dimension fired across my mind. Yellow the rain and green the clouds, but still the storm persisted. Lightning or waterfall, the distinction soon became meaningless... Pushing harder through the bubble of weather... Wind gusting up behind us, furious lashings of icy cyclones... Emptiness ahead, raging fire behind, but we could not escape the storm in between. I pulled on the reins and Swift danced to a dripping halt.

The ground beneath us was soaked and she stepped about gingerly, extracting a foot at a time from the sucking and slurping mud. Was there no way out of this misery? No way that would take us closer to Amber, it appeared. Was the universe trying to tell me something? Stay back, go away?

There was no need to turn Swift around. We could see barely ten

paces ahead or behind, and the path I desired could be in front of us just as easily as it could be to the rear. Swift trudged wearily onwards and picked up the slightly more solid surface a minute later. Retreat, retreat... Not back towards the fire, though. Just out of the rain, and into the open... The veil of heavy water thinned, and we emerge into a landscape of drenched blue and limp red desert blossoms.

The hills I had been following drifted away to either side, revealing sparkling plains, vast and lush from the downpour that preceded us. Flowers seemed somehow too congratulatory for our retreat, though, and I removed them along with the last of the rain. A patch of blue sky opened up in the distance at the same time as the black clouds behind us sent a self-satisfied rumble.

A small rodent stuck its head up out of a hole and squeaked at us before ducking out of sight again. The sound was delightful, and I smiled as I took off my poncho and shook it out. I was soaked to the skin despite its protection, but the blue sky had brought some sunshine with it as well. Two globes hung in the sky, one green and one red. Together they produced a pleasant, and (I felt) well-deserved warmth on my back as I rode further.

The topology of Shadow is a field of study from which few have emerged both sane and informed. Travelling back and forth between Chaos and Amber fairly regularly, however, one cannot help but notice certain features that crop up consistently in certain places under certain circumstances, and I was fairly sure that this bi-solar steppe was not on my regular route home. With any luck, striking out for Amber from this place would allow me to circumvent whatever surprises were in store for me on the main trail.

Once again I dug my heels into Swift's flanks and pushed through the envelope of locality.

When the earthquake hit, I knew that there was more to these disruptions than just coincidence. Call me superstitious.

I stopped Swift and jumped off her back while we rode out the quake. It wasn't too severe a shock, but I had a feeling that there was a worse one waiting just around the corner. Time for playing about in Shadow was over. I had a message for my King that was too important to be held up for any longer. My Trumps came to hand easily, and Random's card lay on top. The last time I had tried contacting him I had almost been absorbed by a green wave, but I was prepared for that now, and would be on my guard this time.

Random looks rakish in his orange, red and browns. I had inherited my father's Trump deck after his death, and the portraits had all been drawn before Random became King. The wrinkles I had seen on his brow the last time we spoke were very recent. I tried to bring his face into a closer, more psychic focus... Tried, but failed.

Either he wasn't taking the call, or there was something up with the Trumps.

I decided to try the next card down in my deck to test the latter hypothesis, and found myself looking at Flora's charming image. I opened myself to memories of her, tried to imagine her essence as my eyes danced from her chin to her eyes to her nose... which twitched... telling me I had contact.

"Yes?" She said. The picture of her on the card morphed into a scene of quiet study. She had her hair up in a bun and a pair of horn-rimmed glasses perched on her nose. She wore a green shirt and sat behind a leather-topped oak desk. Her face softened when she recognized me, and she smiled as she took off the glasses.

"Flora," I said. "Hello."

"Beck, how pleasant. Where are you?"

"In the middle of nowhere right now; literally." I felt the ground tremble around me once again, but Flora's study filled my vision. "Have you spoken with Random of late?"

"Not for some time, no." She looked me up and down and I felt uncomfortable about my current, wrinkled appearance. "You look a little... distressed? Are you all right?"

"Fine," I smiled, not wanting to stray too far from the subject. "I just got a bit wet earlier on. Do you know of any strange occurrences back in Amber, then?"

"I have been out of touch for a while." A wolfhound, standing as high as the desk, padded up to her and nuzzled. She stroked its neck. "But I did hear that Random was ill. Perhaps you should contact Caine?"

"I might do that," I said. Or even try Trumping straight to Amber. Could Random's illness be connected with the green Trump effect I had experienced when I tried to call him before? I frowned. Things were happening, and I just wasn't moving or thinking quite as fast as I like to. Another earth tremor rumbled by underfoot.

"You would tell me if something was the matter, wouldn't you, Beck?" Flora asked pointedly.

"Of course I would," I replied brightly, and cut the contact. The landscape around me had changed in the short (or was it?) time I had been linked to Flora. The earthquakes had cracked the ground like a mirror. A sharp, wide fissure ran directly across my path. I looked around and saw that it curled behind me and returned on itself, effectively leaving me isolated on an island of dead grass and baked clay. Behind me, I also noticed two figures on horseback watching. I turned to face them fully.

The figure on the left was a young but rugged-looking man, with dark hair and stubble on his face. He wore a frock coat and old-fashioned riding boots. A tightly starched collar looked painful

around his neck. His name was Al. I had seen him at an Embassy function last year. The other person, a powerfully built woman of average height and looks I recognized as Moira, one of Julian's kids. Her hair was red, and she wore green and grey. Both their horses were still sweating and steaming, and had started grazing on the dry grass already. They had most likely been waiting for me to finish my Trump call.

"Hi," Moira called out to me. "Stuck?"

"Only a temporary obstruction, I'm sure," I replied.

"Latest in a series?" Al asked.

"Are you being blocked too?" Al shrugged. I didn't recall him saying much at the Embassy function, either. He would not have asked his question if the Shadow barriers hadn't affected him in some way as well, though.

"Are you heading back for the meeting?" Moira asked.

"What meeting?" A man in my position should never be forced to reveal his ignorance, but I saw no alternative this time. They had some information, and I needed some. The fastest way to get it was a straight question. Father would have kicked me for being so straightforward.

"The one Caine called. Weren't you invited?" Moira's lips curled up at the edges in a mildly superior smile. It was the old family game again. I had thought that the younger generation would have more sense than to get involved in verbal fencing matches at moments of crisis and weakness, but it was clear that Moira thought she had scored a point on me. I sighed.

"Apparently not. But I need to get back to Amber anyway. I have important intelligence to deliver to Random."

"Can you not just use a Trump?" Al asked.

"I have tried," I said. "But Random's is blocked in a most peculiar way. Have you used the Trumps lately?" Al shook his head, and Moira remained impassive. I stepped up to the edge of the chasm between us and looked down. It was about four metres across, and many times that straight down. "I need to contact Caine. If he answers, we can all go directly to him back in Amber, and avoid the rest of Shadow."

Moira nodded and smiled again. "You don't expect us to join you over there, do you?" she said. Our little island here was barely big enough for the two of us, let alone Moira, Al and their two large horses. I looked at Swift. We had jumped over a multitude of fallen trees and potholes on our journey so far. Swift had not protested, and I didn't feel that she had been pushing herself to her limits. I could probably jump the gap at its narrowest point, but was there enough of a run up for Swift to make it over?

Swift nuzzled up to me as I stood there estimating speeds, drops

and parabolic equestrian flight paths. I patted her neck. She felt warm and friendly, and seemed a bit rested after her earlier exertions. Can horses read minds? I've always wondered. There was an aura of infectious confidence about her. I resolved to try the jump.

"Stand back," I called to Moira and Al as I leaped up into the saddle. I patted Swift on her neck and whispered some encouraging words into her ear. Al reared his steed and moved back several paces; Moira stepped strategically aside. I guided Swift back as far as I reckoned we could go. The ground beneath Swift's rear hooves started to crumble. I kicked my heels into her flanks and she ran. We jumped.

For a moment we flew...

...And landed, safely. Swift hit the ground running, and slowed into a gentle trot as I guided her around a lazy circle back to Moira and Al.

"That was quite a jump," Moira said graciously.

"Fine horse," said Al.

"Thanks," I replied, grinning. I was already shuffling through my deck of Trumps for Caine's card.

I concentrated on Caine's dark features, brimmed by the green of his tricorn hat. We had been close, once. Losing him so soon after losing my father had been a blow, and finding out that it was a trick had been devastating. Caine's whiskers seemed to twitch for a moment, then turned green. One of those visual afterimage effects, I thought for a second, until his lips assumed a greenish tinge as well. His whole face seemed to be swirling, spiralling in on itself in sickening slow motion. Forest green, sea green, feeding green... The wall of flame stood in front of me again, calling to me with the plaintive tones of a sad kitten. I had to fight it, resist!

It snapped, and I returned to reality. I was shaking, and sweat ran from my brow.

"Are you OK?" Moira's voice was calm, but filled with concern. She manoeuvred her horse next to mine, and reached out to hold my shoulder. "You were turning green at the edges. It looked like some kind of faulty Trump effect."

I rubbed my eyes and looked over to her. "Yeah," I said. "I'm fine. But I just ran into the same block I found on Random's Trump a while ago. It tried to suck me in towards itself. Not very pleasant." A headache was starting to form in my temples, right where it hurts the most. I closed my eyes.

"Alfred," Moira called. "Did you hear that?"

"Mm-hmm."

"We must try some of the other Trumps," she ordered. "They might not all be blocked. You take Benedict, and I'll try my father."

Beck?" I opened my eyes, and squinted against the light, which seemed to have become brighter. "You try Fiona, if you're able."

I nodded and slowly withdrew Fiona's card. I didn't focus on it, though. "Be careful," I said to Al. He looked at me with a bored expression. "If you do find the block, remember that you are fighting it. It's very seductive. Don't let yourself be pulled in." He blinked at me before taking a breath and looking at the card he held in his hand.

Moirá smiled at me before looking at Julian's Trump. Perhaps she wasn't so bad after all.

I looked down at the card I held in my own hand. Fiona: red haired, soft rosy cheeks, delicate eyebrows, a green satin dress, green eyes, green ears, lovely green lipstick and... I passed my hand quickly over the Trump and flipped it over. My head throbbed gently. I had no doubt that it would have got a lot worse if I had let myself get any deeper into the contact.

I put my Trumps back in my pocket and looked over at Moira and Al. They were both deep in concentration, and was there a slight glow to Al's outline? Yes: he was definitely starting to turn green at the edges. The colour deepened and crept over his face and the rest of his body. I watched as he closed his eyes tight. He grunted and cast his Trumps down onto the ground, but the glow increased in intensity and he was starting to fade.

"Fight it!" I yelled at him, and his form seemed to solidify again for a moment before turning transparent again. I leaped off Swift and dashed over to his deck of Trumps. The pack was held in a leather slipcase. Benedict's card lay next to it. I grabbed the pack and jammed Benedict's cold card back into it. Wherever Al was going, he would be better equipped for survival if he had his Trumps with him.

"Catch!" I called. I tossed Al the pack at the very same instant as his lips moved, uttering a single word that was obliterated by the sharp snapping sound that accompanied it. His form became solid and resumed its regular colour again just in time for the deck to hit his chest. In the instant it took for him to blink open his eyes, his right hand had found a dagger and brought it to a throwing position. He was aiming it straight at me.

"Shit, Beck," he said, lowering his arm. He then narrowed his eyes in pain, groaned, and dropped the dagger to the ground. He sank his head into his hands and moaned for a little longer.

He must have had his own method for cutting off unwanted Trump attacks. From the sounds he was making, I also guessed that it had left him with a bit of a headache.

"Whoa," Moira said behind me. "That's quite a kick." I looked round and saw her rubbing her forehead.

"No luck with Julian?" I asked.

"Hmm, no," she said. "I got hold of that block you mentioned, though. How about you?"

"Same here," I said. My own headache was starting to subside, though. Perhaps experience was making me better at repelling the green flaming monster. "Alfred found it as well."

"Well, that's only three we've tried; there are still plenty more to go. I'll check on Gérard, if you take Bleys. Al, do you have a Trump of..."

"Forget it!" Al shouted, then winced. "Fry your own mind if you like, but leave me out of this!"

"Wimp!" Moira called out to him.

"Hey, hey, calm down! Arguing over this isn't going to get us anywhere." I held my hands out, palms up, in a gesture of peace. Moira glared at me then, but after a moment her gaze softened. Al still looked pained. "I happen to agree with Alfred. We have tried to contact a reasonable sample of the family, and the only one who wasn't blocked was Flora. I contacted her just before the two of you arrived, and she wasn't in Amber anyway."

"So you want to assume that everyone back in Amber is blocked?" Moira asked.

"It doesn't seem too unreasonable an assumption," I replied.

"That doesn't leave us with many options," Al said. "If we can't get to Amber through Shadow or by Trump, how do we travel?"

"I'm starting to wonder if Amber is the place we ought to be heading for," I said. "If there is some kind of trouble there, we might be better placed to deal with it from the outside."

"So what do you suggest we do?" Al said. "Just wait here until someone calls for help? Then what?"

"No, I think we should seek out the root of the problem. If we can't walk through Shadow towards Amber, perhaps we can walk towards whoever put up the barriers."

"That's ridiculous. You don't have a destination! If you don't know who—or what!—is causing this, then how can you possibly shift through Shadow towards him? Besides, if it is a single person, it's likely to be someone within the family. Someone back in Amber. You know what they're like. We'd end up going in the same direction as before and hitting our heads on the same damn blocks again."

"Wait," Moira said. "I think I see what you're getting at, Beck. If whoever is behind this is back in Amber, then we wouldn't be shifting directly towards Amber: we would be shifting towards a distinct person. It would be like asking a different question that just happens to have a similar answer."

"It's possible," I said. "I've never actually tried anything like it

myself, but I hear that it can be done."

"You're both nuts," Al said.

"Does that mean you won't come with us?" Moira asked.

"I didn't say that. If you succeed, you'll need my help."

"What makes you think we can't take care of ourselves?"

"Enough!" I said. "We're wasting time. If we're going to go, let's go. We can argue on the way." I paced back to Swift and jumped back up into her saddle. Moira frowned at me while Al put away his Trumps. Then the two of them looked at each other and fumed. Ah, young love.

"I'll lead," I volunteered as I trotted off ahead.

I took another sip from the glass of water Julian had refilled for me a few minutes ago. The dusky light washing in through the gothic windows of the great hall sparkled in Bleys' red hair, making it look like genuine fire. Llewella had brought him a bottle of wine and a goblet before making her excuses and leaving our cosy little gathering. Julian, Bleys and I had taken seats at the heavy oak table while I continued to tell my story. Servants had quietly and efficiently cleared away the day's debris, leaving us alone in this cavernous space. Well, except for Caine: he still sat, unmoving and unblinking, in an armchair ten paces to my left.

Bleys held the crystal goblet up to the light and contemplated the deep liquid within. The twilight made the wine look blacker than blood. If there was any emotion I could ascribe to Bleys at that precise moment it was sadness. I could not tell if he had been listening to what I had been saying, but he certainly didn't appear to have noticed that I had taken a break to come up for some air.

My stomach rumbled. The dizziness I had felt earlier was gone, but hunger had come up and taken its place. I hadn't eaten for ages. Julian must have heard the noise. He placed a hand on my arm and nodded in the direction of the kitchens.

"Great idea," I said and pushed my chair back to stand up.

"Wait," Bleys said. He didn't look at me. He swirled the wine in his glass and looked out the window.

"I'm hungry. Surely there's time for something to eat?"

"Let's just speak alone for a while." Bleys turned to look Julian in the eye. The words were directed at me, but the underlying message of 'get out' was clearly for Julian.

"I'll get some tacos," Julian grunted as he stood up and walked off. His boots made slapping sounds on the flagstones as he left the room.

"Easy on the cheese," Bleys called after him. He smiled when Julian rounded the corner and disappeared down the corridor. He tossed down the last of his wine and put the goblet down on the table with the studious care of a man who knows he has drunk too much.

A single bottle of wine shouldn't really have given Bleys that much of a buzz, but I didn't know what he'd been drinking before that.

"So," I said. "Alone at last?"

"Don't get cheeky with me, kid," Bleys said. "Julian isn't here to protect you this time."

"Is that why you wanted this privacy? To threaten me?"

"You think that was a threat?" He leaned over the table, smiled thinly, and whispered: "That wasn't even close."

"Look, I have no idea what the hell you were doing while all this was going on. And if you don't want to tell me, well, that's fine. Perhaps I made the mistake of thinking that you were one of the responsible ones around here, and that you would be interested in my view of the problem. But it appears that you are just another part of it!"

"You really have no idea, do you..." Bleys slouched back in his seat, and he looked sad again.

"Damn it, Bleys!" I stood up and pounded my fist down on the table hard enough to fracture the wood. Anger is an ugly emotion, and one that I am highly skilled at avoiding. But it seemed like Bleys was deliberately trying to get under my skin, and succeeding. "Why don't you tell me, then?"

Julian chose that moment to walk back in through the door.

"Ah, brother," Bleys said to him. "I thought your nephew was a diplomat, not a bar-brawler like his father."

I saw red. All the tiredness, the hunger, the aches and pains: they all disappeared in the rage I felt at that moment. I can handle insults directed at my own person, but when someone spits on Eric's grave like that...

Instinct took over from reason as I tried to leap over the table at Bleys. I was bare-handed, but I didn't see that as a problem.

I didn't get far, though. Julian closed the gap between us in a flash, and took hold of my left shoulder in a vice-like grip. I jabbed my right elbow backwards into what I hoped was his solar plexus—the fact that I had no quarrel with him was entirely irrelevant—and heard him produce a satisfying 'oomph' as it connected. His grip didn't loosen at all, though.

"Beck!" Julian growled. "Take it easy!" His other arm came round and circled my chest, pinning my right arm to my side. He tried to force me back down into my chair. Reluctantly, and with the seething emotions draining slowly out of me, I followed his direction.

Bleys smiled lazily. He looked supremely confident and relaxed, and hadn't even twitched at the sight of my outburst.

Stupid, stupid, letting myself go like that. I wanted to blame the tiredness, but although I knew it was partly to blame, in the end I

was fully responsible for my own actions. All Bleys had done was pull some strings and I had danced like a marionette. Had that been his intention all along? A display of power? A simple threat? But why?

What would even be the point in asking? He would never tell me, except in his own good time. I sighed, and Julian relaxed his grip on me. I clenched and unclenched my fists a few times, and took a few more deep breaths before looking up at Julian. "I'm OK now," I said.

How he manages to be so eloquent with a simple glance I will never know, but he said "You'd better be," without even moving his lips. He let go of my arms, and I flexed my shoulders to make sure they still worked. Julian's grip is fierce.

A servant appeared in the far doorway, holding a tray covered in steaming tacos. He looked nervously at Julian, who bade him to approach with a small wave of his hand. The aromas coming from the tray were amazing: beef fried perfectly brown in red and green spices, jalapeño peppers adding a piquant zing to the top of the smell. Even the lettuce and tomato added a crisp freshness to the scent. And mountains of molten cheese, dripping orangely over the sides of the crunchy tortillas. My mouth watered.

The servant laid the tray on the table, and produced another three bottles of wine from under his apron. He corked them and made a swift exit.

Julian picked up a taco and munched. Not wanting to be blatantly impolite by rushing in, I waited for Bleys to follow his lead, but he just looked at Julian through slightly narrowed eyes, his expression hostile. Then I remembered the cheese. Bleys doesn't like melted cheese.

"Delicious," Julian mumbled, wiping the corners of his mouth. He looked at Bleys and smiled. "Try some," he said.

I couldn't resist. "Mmm, cheesy," I said as I picked up a taco and lifted it to my mouth. "Just the way I like them."

"This place feels terribly familiar," Al said, casting a suspicious glance at an ancient tree-trunk. We were crossing a vast plain, all dry grass and weathered stumps of long-dead trees. Moira looked over at him and opened her mouth to say something—probably along the lines of, "You're just imagining things again"—but decided to keep silent. She passed her glance to me and I saw that she recognized this place as well, though perhaps not on a conscious level.

I had figured it out a few minutes ago. I smiled easily and pointed over to a dried-up river bed that wound a lazy path to the foothills in the distance. "The river Oisen," I said, pulling on Swift's

reins and bringing her to a halt. Moira and Al stopped as well and took a moment to survey and re-evaluate the surroundings. Recognition passed over their faces as they saw other significant landmarks in a new light.

"This is Arden?" the two of them said in unison. I nodded.

"Not the version we know and love, though," I said.

For the last few hours I had had the feeling that we were nearing the end of our journey. There was no mystical sense of finality: just a general slowing down of our shifts through Shadow.

"If this is forest, I wonder what the city will look like?" Moira mused. "At least, I assume that's where we're heading." I nodded again. There were foothills in the distance, with perhaps some low mountains behind them: it was hard to tell from this distance. Pushing through Shadow this close to the real Amber would be difficult at best, but the going was slightly easier here. I reckoned that if our ability to shift persisted for even a short while longer, we could reach the city in just a few hours—that is, if there was a city for us to reach.

Al brushed some dust off his boots and sniffed casually. "So," he said. "Do we have a plan yet?"

Moira rolled her eyes and spurred her horse on again. Al shot her an accusing glare before looking over at me. "Well?" he insisted.

"Let's just play it by ear for now," I said, and jogged Swift into motion. Alfred followed, reluctantly. Moira took the lead from me. I was quite happy to cede it to her, for I was tired. Shifting Shadow towards such an indefinite quantity as 'whoever is blocking our way' is not as simple as it might sound.

We closed the distance between us and the hills quickly. Within an hour we had left the barren Arden and found a small path that wound a slow but steady way in the direction we were all quite familiar with. The flora and fauna around us were yellowed and listless. I saw only one bird of prey, a old red buzzard, but it didn't fly. It sat on a rock and eyed us warily as we passed. The chirrup of crickets in the dry grass was always ahead and behind, but never where we walked. Our mood was subdued, as if the tired surroundings were sapping our very impulse to stay on the move. Apart from the path itself, we didn't see any evidence of human habitation until we rounded the last bend of the last hill.

A village of no more than a hundred ramshackle houses stood a mile away across a shallow valley, at the base of a hill that was only marginally taller than the ones we had just passed through. Dark figures moved between the houses, some dragging carts behind them. The village was surrounded by a tall fence, outside of which groups of people worked in the few acres of sandy green land that stretched from the fence to the dried-up river bed that ran through

the centre of the valley.

Half-way up the hill behind it, and in stark contrast to the village, stood a castle. Its shiny white stone bulk easily dwarfed the entire community below it, even including the fields. Its structure was a toy parody of the real Castle Amber. Colourful pennants flew from the towers and turrets, and multi-symboled banners hung from the crenellations. A wide road led from the village to the main gates, which stood wide open.

We stood there for a while, just looking at the place, then by unspoken agreement all moved forward again. Alfred rode ahead. As we drew closer to the village, people stopped working. They laid down their tools, or leaned on them, and stared at us and our horses. Small children hid beneath their mothers' skirts. A group of slightly older ones shouted something unintelligible at us, but scarpered when we noticed them. I felt distinctly uncomfortable. The way we looked, they must have figured out that we were bound for the castle. They were right, but if I was reading the social situation here correctly, I felt guilty on behalf of whoever lived there.

An elderly man with a short white beard, weather-hardened face and a limp shuffled out of the field into our path. He took off his hat and held it to his chest. He stood with his head bowed as we approached. Al stopped in front of him, and the man looked up cautiously.

"What is this place?" Al asked bluntly.

"Milord, this is Amber, Milord," the man said. His voice was soft, but I heard a measure of strength underneath the docility. He held some authority here in the village, I could tell. It was authority that flowed from the people, not from the castle.

"Amber?" Al said. "This dump?" I closed my eyes and groaned inwardly. He continued: "Who lives up in the castle then?"

Any possible goodwill the old man might have borne towards us was gone now. "The royal family, Milord," he said.

"Yeah, yeah, but which members, exactly?"

"I'm afraid I don't know precisely who is in residence right now, Milord."

"It doesn't have to be precise, just tell me who rules the damn place!"

"King Random... milord."

Al glanced back at me over his shoulder and grinned. "Why thank you, old man," he said in a firm and decisive tone. He reached into a pocket and pulled out a few shiny coins which he tossed down onto the ground. The man lowered his eyes and stood perfectly still. I could see his hands bunched into fists around the brim of his hat.

Moirahad manoeuvred her horse next to Swift and me. "I can't believe he just did that," she whispered.

"Me neither," I said. "Let's go before they lynch us." We jogged our horses into motion, and flanked Al. He flicked his own reins and moved along with us.

"Well, he was helpful," Al said with a slight smile. I looked back and watched as the old man made his way back into the field. A knot of people gathered around him, and they stared back at me. Two young boys ran up to the spot where we had just stood, and picked up Alfred's coins. They laughed and made some rude gestures in the general direction of the castle.

We passed through the village unchallenged. In fact, there was not a single person out on what passed for the streets. Most of them must have been out in the fields. I did hear a door slamming just as we passed the fence, though. That's right, mother, lock up your children. An air of threatened hostility hung over the streets as we made our way to the well-paved road that led up to the castle. I let out a short sigh of relief as we passed back out beyond the confines of the fence.

A wisp of lilting music drifted out through the gateway to meet us. We drew to a halt about ten paces from the opening. From there we could see a courtyard just inside the walls, with many doors leading off from it. A few benches sat in sheltered corners next to posts with tethers for horses. The only things that stirred were the leaves on a few young cherry trees that were scattered around the quadrangle. The music that the wind had brought us was just barely audible now.

The guard posts at the gateway were equally deserted. I jumped off Swift and poked my head into one of the wardrobe-sized cubicles. A small chair and a couple of pegs hammered into the wall, presumably for hanging up overcoats, were the only adornments. There was no evidence at all that any guarding had taken place here recently.

"This is bizarre," Al said as I turned around. He had dismounted as well, and he led his horse forward into the courtyard. He scanned all around him, and walked off to the left, out of our field of vision.

"Hey, take a look at this!"

Moirá frowned, and rode forward into the courtyard. I took Swift's reins and we followed her lead. Al had tied up his horse to a post next to a high trough filled with water and was examining the weapons rack he had found. Five swords of varying length, a pike or two, a halberd and a quarterstaff hung on the rack. They were attached by wooden hooks for easy removal.

What was going on here? If the villagers wanted to overrun this place, they could do so in minutes. They wouldn't even have to bring their own weapons! Even with my limited tactical knowledge it was quite obvious that the Castle (or at least what we had seen of it so far)

was a soft target of the first water.

Yet somewhere in this Castle, someone was controlling access to the real Amber, controlling access to our relatives via the Trumps and who knows what else. If I were behind this, there was no way I would allow myself to be—or even appear—this vulnerable.

The wind changed and brought us some more music. It was coming from inside the Castle itself, from the other side of the courtyard. Al had picked himself a sword, and was testing its weight with a few loose thrusts and cuts. Moira watched him with a dismissive air. About an inch of her own blade protruded casually from its scabbard. It shone like polished moonlight. Moira's display impressed me a lot more than Al's.

When they heard the music, they both looked over to where it was coming from. "I think that that has to be our next goal," I said. "It's the only sign of life so far. But let's be careful. I think there must be more to this place than meets the eye."

I tied up Swift, Moira tied up her steed, and we headed over to the nearest door on the opposite side of the courtyard. It was open, and we passed through unchallenged. The corridor we entered was stone-floored and lit by a series of plain oil lamps running its entire length. A few pictures hung on the walls: sedate river and garden scenes, no portraits.

Now that we were inside, the music was louder, and the tune became clearer. It was a melody I had heard before, in Merlin's den: one of his father's more up-tempo compositions. I could now also make out people's voices. So the place was inhabited, after all. The voices were high and energetic, as if there was some kind of party going on.

The volume of the music swelled momentarily, then, with the clunk of a door closing, dropped back down to its original level. "That way," Moira pointed. She set off down the corridor at a fast walk. Al and I followed. Up ahead, probably round the corner, there were more footsteps, and a woman's giggling laugh. Moira rounded the corner first, but I was not too far behind.

The laugh had come from a pretty woman dressed in little more than a toga. She was being carried in the arms of a tall, powerfully built naked guy with a sheepish smile full of perfect teeth. His skin was bronzed and his hair was blond. Her skin was olive, and her hair was green. "Aunt Llewella?" Al gasped from behind me. Recognition dawned on me at that point as well, and my jaw dropped.

"Oops," Llewella giggled. She playfully slapped the big guy's shoulder. He grinned at us, shouldered open the door he was standing next to, and disappeared inside with Llewella laughing like a schoolgirl.

"Ooh, Sven," we heard Llewella sigh before Moira slammed the door shut behind the two of them. Her words became stifled mumbles after that.

"A little privacy, I think?" Moira said.

"Shouldn't we, ah, question them?" Al asked. Moira favoured him with a withering glance of pure contempt and he shut up. She turned to face the door that Llewella and Sven must have exited from. The music was certainly louder here, and there were more raucous noises coming from behind the door.

"The layout of this place is similar to that of the real Castle Amber's," I commented. "That should be one of the ballrooms behind there."

Moira turned the knob and pushed. The door swung open and granted us a vision of Dionysian revelry. It was indeed a ballroom, and the dance floor was filled with bodies boogying, bumping and grinding to the insistent beat of the music. On the other side of the room, across the sea of sweaty faces, the band played on. Corwin wore dark sunglasses and ground away at his guitar with grungey intensity while Random hammered out an impossible rhythm on his special orange neon drums. Bill Roth brought up the rear with a pumping double bassline on an instrument that was almost twice the size he was.

Once we had all had a good look, Moira closed the door and brought the noise back down to an acceptable level. "That's some party," Al said.

"I don't like it one bit," Moira said. "This feels very wrong."

"I agree," said Al. "But if this is the origin of all the troubles, at least we're looking for someone with a great sense of humour. I mean, they've gone to the trouble of stocking this place with some pretty good caricature copies of our aunts and uncles..."

"What makes you think they're copies?" Moira said grimly.

"You think they're the real thing?" I asked.

"Then *they're* doing all of this?" Al said. "I think it's more likely that they are here by invitation of someone else," Moira said, looking at me. "Our mysterious causer?"

"But is he or she necessarily of malicious intent?" Al said. He seemed eager to go and join the party.

"Did we get an invitation?" Moira asked pointedly.

"Maybe this is where that green whirlpool Trump effect would have taken us," Al shrugged. "Keeps the party exclusive. Only those with Trumps are allowed in."

"I think I'd feel more comfortable just being asked, thank you. What do you think, Beck?"

I weighed up the possibilities the two of them had thrown before me. There had been some kind of music at the end of the green

Trump effect I had experienced when I had first tried to contact Random. That would tally with the theory that the contact would have led here. But I felt a nagging doubt about the wisdom of accepting the invitation that way. During the contact I had felt compelled to give in to the green, to embrace it without question.

"I think there's a good chance that if those people in there are genuinely Corwin, Random and Llewella, they are not in full control of their own actions. This makes our opponent—and I don't think that's too strong a term at this stage—a very dangerous person, and a very powerful one." A terrible, terrible thought occurred to me at that point: Dara...?

"Huh," Al grunted. "And we're going up against this opponent, just the three of us?"

"Well, first we have to find out who this opponent is, and if possible also what she wants."

"She?" Al said.

"In the generic sense."

"What about the Pattern?" Moira asked. "A copy of Amber like this might also have a copy of the Pattern. Could our adversary be using it to generate the Trump effect?"

"I don't know," I replied. "But I can think of plenty of things a Pattern, even an imperfect copy, could be used for. We should probably check it out."

"We'd have to go through the party to get there..." Al sounded hopeful.

"Too risky," Moira said. "If our uncles in there are under someone else's control, they might have orders to investigate anything out of the ordinary."

"Well Llewella certainly didn't seem too eager to interrupt her, um, activities to case us."

"But still," I said firmly. "Moira's right. There are other ways to the Pattern. We shouldn't take unnecessary risks while we don't know for certain what's going on." I turned on my heel and walked back down the corridor at a brisk pace. Judging by the footsteps behind me, Moira followed immediately, while Al took a few seconds to make up his mind to come with us.

The layout of the castle was indeed very much like that of the real Amber's. The main difference was the sparsity of decoration here. Apart from the small luxury of a few paintings just inside the front door, the decor was entirely functional. There were no tapestries, portraits, sculptures, carpets or any of the opulent gold leafwork that in Amber spreads like ivy over any surface that holds still for long enough. I found it bare and lacking, but not without a certain aesthetic simplicity. Living here would be a very focussed experience, I felt. On the other hand, the revellers in the ballroom

didn't seem to agree.

We easily wound our way through the maze of hallways, crossroads, corridors and stairs and found the familiar doorway leading down into the depths of the castle in its usual place. A lantern was hung just inside the door. I lit it from a similar, lit one just outside and examined the staircase. Its spiral curve disappeared twistily into the darkness below.

"Why don't you go first, Beck?" Al suggested. I looked back at him. He gave me a fake smile, probably annoyed at missing the party.

"Very well," I said, and proceeded to make my way down the stairs. Moira followed directly behind me while Al brought up the rear. Our steps sliced through the crisp silence like heavy knives tapping against marble chopping boards. I could hear each individual breath that the three of us took. It was eerie, for as long as it lasted: we had descended for barely ten minutes when we reached the bottom.

The guard post at the entrance to the dungeons was as deserted as the ones we had seen back up on the surface. It was all stocked up, though, so I lit another two lanterns and handed them to Moira and Al. Al had his sword at the ready as well. I still wasn't sure what we would find down here, but I had the feeling that cold steel would not be the factor to swing the balance in our favour. I decided not to point this out to him, though. It would only have started another argument.

Moira spearheaded the way along the dank passageways that led through the underground spaces. We passed many cells, but did not see a single one that was occupied. Nor did we hear any sounds other than our own. Even the normally commonplace shivers and squeals of rats, bats and spiders were singularly absent.

We eventually came to the seventh door, the tall grey one made of some slate-like material. The key, as usual, hung on a hook outside. Moira plucked it off by its ring. She paused for a moment before inserting it in the lock.

"Can you hear anything?" Al asked.

"When have you ever heard anything behind this door?" Moira replied.

"I've never had any reason to believe that someone might be waiting for me behind it," Al said. "Until now."

Moira shook her head. She turned the key with a soft 'snick' and gently pushed the door open. It was dark inside. I mean, like completely dark. The only illumination came from our lanterns, which lit up the floor about a few paces into the chamber. At least there was a chamber behind the door. The way the noise we were making disappeared inside without a trace of an echo made that

perfectly clear.

"This can't be the right room," Al said. Yet the door was in the right place, and no other door we had seen down here had a key hanging next to it. Moira cautioned Al and me to stay back while she stepped inside. Her lantern lit up the ground around her, but didn't stretch far enough to illuminate any of the walls. The cavern was big enough, then, to be the Pattern Room. It just didn't contain a Pattern.

"Hold it..." Moira said. Al and I both took a step towards her and tried to get a better look of what she had seen. She walked towards the centre of the chamber (or at least, where I imagined the centre to be), then kneeled down to examine something on the ground. By her light, I could make out a vague blue line running in front of her. "I think you should come and have a look at this," she called.

We didn't need to be told twice. Al hustled forward to take up a place next to Moira. I took my time, and let my eyes adjust a bit to the darkness within the chamber. Now that there were three lights inside, a lot more was visible, and I could just barely make out some kind of textured vertical surface an indeterminable distance away on the other side of the room. It had to be the far wall. This was indeed starting to look more and more like the real Pattern Room.

When I saw what Moira had found on the floor, it became clear that we had come to the right place. A mosaic of small blue tiles formed a narrow line just ahead of where she kneeled. This line stretched away to the left and right. It curled around in a familiar kind of way, and returned to a point just a pace or two away from where we stood, where it continued its lazy way around and around that eternal pattern... *The Pattern*.

"Curiouser and curiouser," Moira said. "I've seen broken Patterns before, but never one like this."

"Did they all glow?" I asked her.

"Yes. None as fiercely as the original, but they all lit up their rooms well enough to read by. This one just seems... dead."

"No it isn't," Al said. He was holding his hand out, palm down over the nearest line. "Here, feel this." I extended my own hand out over the line. At first there was nothing, then a slight tingling. It was very faint, but there was definitely something there. I suddenly regretted not having paid more attention to my magic tutors when I was younger. I wasn't really prepared for a metaphysical investigation.

"I don't feel anything," Moira said. She was also holding her hand over the line.

"No tingling, like goosebumps?" Al asked.

"It must be a trick of the mind. You're expecting something, so you feel something."

"No," I said. "There's definitely a trace of something here. I can feel it, too." Moira looked sceptical. "Are you sure you don't feel it?"

"Absolutely." She turned her hand over once, twice, then held her other hand into the line's airspace as well. She shook her head. "There's nothing there, at least for me."

Al stood up and walked along the edge of the line for about twenty paces. "It starts here," he said. I regarded him through narrowed eyes, wondering what he was going to do. He held up his lantern and raised his right foot.

"No!" Moira shouted. "Don't do it!"

"I'm just checking," Al said.

"Careful," I warned. His foot hovered over the starting point. He frowned, then took the foot back and placed it on solid, non-Pattern ground. "It's resisting me," he said. "I can't put my foot down on it. Come and check for yourselves."

Moira and I both approached the start. The line of the mosaic ended quite abruptly, and in exactly the same place as the real Pattern would have started back in the real Amber. Al took a step back, allowing me to take up position in front of the line. I lifted my foot up and tried to place it down on the mosaic. It lowered slightly, but there was resistance... resistance that increased to the point where my foot came to a halt a few inches above the ground. The force didn't push me back, but it certainly prevented me from going any further. It was almost as if my foot was on the ground already. I gave it one more push before giving up, but there was no way I could step onto this mock-Pattern.

"Let me try," Moira said. I made way for her and watched closely. She lifted up her foot...

...and put it down on the line. "Oh," Al said. "Can you lift it back off again?"

I asked. She looked down at her foot. She raised the toe of her boot and wiggled it. "Sure feels like it. But I'm not sure if I should. I think I should investigate it further." She took a second step onto the line. There were no sparks, no blue light. There was nothing to indicate that she was walking on anything but ordinary ground.

"Do you feel anything?" Al said.

"No," Moira said, taking another cautious step. "Nothing at all." When she seemed completely satisfied that the line was safe, she started walking at a normal pace.

"All the same, don't go straying off the lines."

Holding her lantern up to illuminate the path in front of her, she continued to walk the strange Pattern. Al and I stood back a bit and observed her carefully, but she didn't appear to be experiencing any kind of resistance from the thing itself. The whole process unwound a lot faster than I was expecting. I was used to seeing people walk

the real Pattern, traversing whose entire image can take anything from twenty minutes to over an hour, depending on the physique and the mind-set of the person involved.

Moira was almost running, so fast was she passing through the veils, or the parts of the lines where the veils should have been. She didn't slow down at all on any of the key sections. Next to me, Al tried putting a foot on the Pattern again, but it still resisted him. Whatever effect it was having on Moira, and Moira on it, it wasn't letting its guard down.

And then she was at the centre. I was so busy with my own thoughts, and watching Al, that I hadn't seen her press the final barrier. There probably hadn't been anything to see, though.

"Are you all right?" Al called out to her.

"I'm fine," she said. The room's acoustics carried her words to us as clear as if she had been standing just a few feet away. "But I do feel something strange here at the centre. Perhaps it's like what you felt over the line. It's building up... like..."

"Look out!" Al shouted. I caught a brief glimpse of something shimmering in the air behind Moira. He must have had a better angle on the phenomenon. I took a quick step to the side to get a better view of what was going on.

Moira spun around, drawing her sword as she did so. It sparked in the light of her lantern. The shimmering I had seen had solidified into a human figure: a black-haired man in a blue coat and red trousers had taken up a combat stance facing Moira in the cramped inner space of the Pattern.

"Kytralis!" Moira hissed, dropping her centre of gravity slightly. She drew up her sword into an offensive en-garde.

"Moira," Kytralis said. "Now, at last, you shall die." He lunged forward with the agile speed of a cat. Moira side-stepped him with equal rapidity and flair.

Kytralis, Kytralis... the name hung in my mind like an overripe apple. It dropped through into conscious memory as soon as I put some pressure on it. House Kytralis had been a very minor House in Chaos many, many years ago. An aggressive offshoot of a coalition of quite influential families, the rebels rallied together under the banner of Lord Kytralis, who was granted permission by Sawall himself to start the first new House in centuries. (Thus preceded, a number of other new Houses arose soon thereafter.) That first Lord Kytralis, however, had squandered his resources on waging a series of unwinnable wars. Upon his death he left his sons and grandchildren a legacy of debt, as well as a burden of ill will on the part of his former rebel allies. With no support from their own House, he had effectively condemned them to an eternity of ignoble obscurity. Which they had exploited with ruthless... vapidity.

I could only speculate as to what Moira had done to piss this one off, but he had probably brought it on himself.

"Shit, Beck!" Al cried. "It's a trap!" He hopped from foot to foot, all ready to go rushing to her aid. The fact that the Pattern wouldn't let him only added to his agitated state.

At the center of the Pattern, Kytralis growled as he recovered himself from his failed attack. He stepped forward and hammered away at Moira with a truly furious series of cuts, thrusts and kicks when he got close enough, but they did him no good. Moira batted them aside with deft little flicks and fancies of her gleaming blade, leaving him absolutely no scope for advancement. With a blinding manoeuvre involving an odd-looking triple feint, her blade traced a white line through the air next to Kytralis' fast-retreating head. Not fast enough, though. The line turned red at his neck.

"You were saying?" Moira said to him as he raised his left hand to feel the blood trickling down into his shirt.

Al stopped his hopping. He raised an eyebrow and looked at me with a face full of wonder. "She's not bad," he said. I reconfirmed my opinion of young love. I nodded while Moira turned away Kytralis's next onslaught.

Just as the Castle itself had felt strange to me when we first entered it, this set-up felt off somehow. How had Kytralis managed to construct or find this Shadow, so close to Amber? How had he managed to subvert the Trumps, and our family upstairs (assuming that they were the real thing)? And how was he able to manipulate the Pattern (even though it was flawed)?

No, Kytralis could not be our Adversary. There was more at stake here, far more than revenge against Moira. Kytralis was a distraction, a sheep in wolf's clothing designed to throw us off the scent. Judging by the way Moira was slowly but systematically taking him to pieces, though, he was only going to be a very minor distraction at best. I watched her blade flash again. A few locks of his black hair landed on the ground next to him.

What else could be in store for us? Whatever it was, I had no intention of following the pre-set scenario. I grabbed Al by the shoulder. "Let's go," I said.

"But shouldn't we stay here to help her if something goes wrong?" he asked, fascinated by the complicated dance that was going on in the middle of the room.

"I think someone's trying to tie us up down here. Look at her," I pointed to Moira. "Kytralis is nothing more than a delaying tactic."

"Delaying us? For what?"

"I don't know. But if there's a time-critical element to our Opponent's plans, we can't be doing any good down here. Come on!"

Reluctantly, he turned away from the spectacle. "Moira," I called

to her as we made our way back to the door. "Meet us back upstairs!"

"I may be some time," she said through teeth gritted with anger. Kytralis, thinking that she might be distracted by this extraneous interaction, made a desperate stab at her midriff with the main-gauche knife he had acquired at some point in the last few minutes. Moira grabbed his hand before the blade touched her, twisted his wrist with a crunching motion, and head-butted him in the face. Kytralis staggered back, moaning. The knife dropped from his now-limp left hand. "This is unfinished business."

With those last words I resolved never to get on Moira's bad side. Al gulped as we rushed out through the door and back along the corridors towards the stairs.

Dara... My worst fears were rapidly gaining strength as genuine possibilities. Dara had the know-how to manipulate Trumps as well as Pattern, certainly. Winding Kytralis round her finger would to her have been little more than an afternoon's play. And if Merlin had reckoned that she would be heading this way... It seemed obvious now. I clenched my jaw at the thought of how much time we had already wasted in getting here.

I took the stairs two at a time, with Al hot on my heels. "You... know something... don't you?" He said between breaths. "Maybe," I replied. We had almost reached the top of the stairs. I could see light from the corridor shining through up ahead. Where would Dara herself be? We stopped just inside the door to the hallway to catch our breaths and thoughts.

"So where are we going?" Al said. I didn't reply immediately. There had been a brief sound from just outside the door. I held up one hand, put a finger to my lips, and froze.

"Well, boys?" A woman's voice said. My heart leaped in my chest as the figure in the hallway stepped into our sight. "Where are you going?" Bleys looked at me from under heavy brows. I would have to be very careful about what I said next. Two people less suited than Bleys and Julian to hearing the full truth about what had happened I could not imagine. Their feelings regarding the woman were clear. Perhaps this is why I had ended up telling my story to just the two of them? I shivered at the thought.

"Go on," Bleys said in a gravelly voice. Julian cleared his throat and sat further back in his chair.

I licked my lips. "*It was Fiona,*" I said.

In all her glory. She had looked magnificent in a low-cut forest green dress with a strategically placed slit that ran down her left leg from just below the hip all the way down to the hem. Her red hair had been loose, and it had flowed around her neck and shoulders like a waterfall of flame. A darker than normal shade of lipstick had brought out highlights on her face I had never seen before.

"She must have been drunk, or under the same spell that was affecting the others we had seen," I continued. *"Because just after she asked where we were going, she toppled over into our arms and started giggling."*

I had almost been too stunned by her appearance to catch her. Initially, Al took most of her weight. But he quickly decided that he didn't know what to do with her and passed her to me. Her arm snaked around my waist and she clung to me with great strength while I tried to set her back on her feet. She was wearing high-heeled shoes, which weren't improving her balance at all. I caught Al's eye and used my free hand to point to her feet. He took the hint and gently removed her shoes. She sighed contently. I hardly dared to look her in the eye.

"She teased us for a few moments while we set her on her feet again. We explained briefly what we were doing."

She was laying on lewd innuendo an inch thick, but Bleys and Julian didn't need to know that. I don't consider myself much of a prude, but I couldn't stop myself from blushing at some of her suggestions. Whatever spell she was under, it hadn't taken away any of her strength. Her arm tightened its grip on me. I didn't think she had any intention of letting go. But as I held her, I realized that I didn't really want her to. The fabric of her dress was pleasing to the touch, and the curve of her waist that lay beneath it, well...

"It was I who suggested that she come along with us. It was clear to me that she could not take care of herself in that condition. I was worried that she might harm herself in some way."

With Fiona finally on her feet, we were ready to resume our search for Dara. I had no idea what direction we should take, but this didn't seem too much of a problem at this point. In a single fluid movement Fiona unwrapped my arm from around her and clutched it tightly in her own. "Take me somewhere, Beck," she said in a breathy voice. The bluntness of the proposition shocked me. But at the same time, I was more than slightly attracted to the idea.

I had never thought of Fiona in that way before. Looking back now, though, every memory of her, all the way back to my early years, is touched with an unnatural beauty I hadn't realized was hers... until then. I was transported back to my earliest teenage encounters with love (or lust, as it must have been: I hadn't known what love was back then). Gawking awkwardness, a lack of words, and hot embarrassment at the thought of even being near to the object of my affections. I am surely more sophisticated and controlled now. But damn, if my hormones weren't singing a chorus line at the thought of holding Fiona in both arms, closer to me...

"We headed towards the Throne room. If Dara was after power, and she hadn't locked herself away with the Pattern, that seemed

the most obvious place to try."

I was aware of our goal, it is true; but as we walked through the corridors and chambers of the fake castle, up stairs and down hallways, most of my attention was elsewhere. Fiona had adopted a long, silky stride that seemed designed to maximize hip contact between the two of us. Al walked to my right, trying his best not to stare.

"When we reached the Yellow Ballroom, there was music playing from somewhere, even though no one else was present. Fiona stopped us at that point. She didn't say anything, but it was like she wanted us to wait for something."

Wait, hell. As soon as she heard the music, she curled round in front of me, grabbed my right arm and twirled us across the dance floor in a hot tango that would have left even Caine, the Lord of the Dance, gasping at the impropriety of it. Halfway through, a red rose appeared out of nowhere between her teeth. When I looked into her deep green eyes I saw desire. But that wasn't all. There was a slight haze to her gaze, a veil drawn over the other emotions that resided inside her beautiful head...

This oh-so-slightly blurred look reminded me that she was under some kind of spell, under somebody else's influence. The sudden realization made me miss a step, and Fiona giggled. She pressed her face against my neck, giving me a view of what was going on behind her. Al was talking to someone else on the other side of the dance floor. Concerned, I took the lead in our dance, and tangoed us over to where the two men stood.

"Galfand arrived. He said he had just come from the real castle Amber. I asked him how he had got here, but he told us that that wasn't important. He did urge us to follow him back down to the Great Hall, where we were needed."

Galfand was bought up on Flora's Earth, I believe. He is tall and slender with silver hair and blue eyes. He was wearing an unruffled grey suit and a crisp pink shirt. He reminded me uncomfortably of my own shabby state.

"I have never spent much time with Galfand, but Al seemed to know him quite well. He was sure that Galfand was completely himself, and not mind-wiped by our green Opponent."

"I said that we could not bring Fiona with us in this state, and that we couldn't leave her here. I would take her to one of the nearby balconies to get her some fresh air, then find someplace for her to rest safely. They agreed to head off on their own. I would meet up with them as soon as I had taken care of Fiona."

That I couldn't take her with us was obvious. She was probably still quite capable of taking care of herself, though. Al gave me a sidelong glance, but he was otherwise quite happy to go off and

follow Galfand's star. They departed at a run, leaving the ballroom to Fiona and me.

She tried to pull me into another dance, but I resisted. My attraction to her was not lessened in the least—in fact, our tango had brought an amazingly beautiful rosy glow to her cheeks—but I was aware that when she came back to her senses, she might remember what had gone on between us. I hoped that the memories would be pleasurable, but I didn't want to push my luck too far. I dared not.

Oh, such agony! When she smiled at me I knew that I had always been hers, and always would be. But not now. It could not be now. 'What's the matter, Beck,' she said in a sultry tone. 'We're all alone now.' She moved closer to me, if such a thing was possible. Her body was pressed up against mine, and her hands felt their tantalizingly sensuous way up and down my back...

"I took her to a small sitting room, made sure that she was comfortable, and left her there."

I took a shallow breath before saying, 'We should go now.' I led her across the dance floor to the other end of the ballroom. A narrow door led to a small sitting room with low windows. I drew Fiona inside by her hand and sat her down on a red divan. She lay back on it, leaving her left leg draped over the side. Almost entirely exposed by the slit in her dress, it was creamy white, smooth, and delicately tapered towards a perfect ankle. My heart leaped.

I restrained myself from looking back at her more than once as I walked over to the window. I drew back the curtains and looked out over a small interior courtyard. The window swung out easily on smooth hinges, and a cool afternoon breeze caressed my warm brow.

A delicate hand, warm and soft, caressed my neck. I turned around to find Fiona standing in front of me. The left strap of her dress had slipped to expose one smooth shoulder. Her smile was inviting, and resisting it was probably the hardest thing I have ever done.

'Fiona,' I said, resting my hand on that lovely shoulder. 'I have to go now. You should stay here. You'll be safe.'

Her smile dropped only a fraction, and covered my hand with her own. 'You'll be back soon?' She said breathlessly.

My heart pounded. Some diplomat I was at that point, entirely stuck for words. 'I'll... try,' was the best I could manage. She seemed satisfied, though.

I could not delay my departure any longer. I leaned forward to kiss her on the cheek, that being the gentlemanly thing to do. But she anticipated my move, and turned her head round to intercept my mouth with hers. She enfolded me in her arms and thrust her lithe little torso up against mine. My mouth opened as my eyes closed,

and I drank in the sweetness of that one eternal kiss. Whatever happens, I shall always have that memory, and I shall cherish it to the edge of the Abyss and beyond, as I reach for my death and destiny.

It ended, as it had to. I left her there by the window.

"Her perfume lingered with me as I made my way back across the ballroom. It was sweeter than I had noticed her wear before. I picked up my pace as I walked, hoping to get down to the Great Hall before..."

"Wait," Bleys interrupted. "That's all?"

"What do you mean?" I asked. My heart skipped a beat.

"Nothing happened between you two?"

I frowned. "I'm still not quite sure what you mean, Bleys."

"I saw her looking at you earlier on. I saw you looking at her, too. There's something you're not telling me."

"What, you think I took advantage of her while she was in that state?"

"Don't be a fool, Beck. Fiona bows down before no-one, mentally. She was no more in a trance then than I am now." He gave me a sour smile.

"I assure you, she was not her usual self. If it wasn't a trance or a spell, then she was drugged. Believe me, I know what I'm talking about."

"She told you, didn't she?" Bleys whispered.

"Told me? Told me what?" I genuinely had no idea what he was talking about. My confusion wasn't hard to fake.

"Very well," he said, leaning forward over the table and fixing me with a steely glare. "Have it your way. Play it cool, Beck. Just like you. Just know that I know you know." He sat back. Julian looked at me blankly. I shrugged.

Bleys didn't know. He didn't even suspect the truth. He did, on the other hand, appear to have convinced himself that I knew a secret of Fiona's. This could be useful in the future, as a bargaining chip for who-knows-what. I decided to keep it under my hat. But my secret love was safe where it belonged: in the depths of my heart.

As for Julian... It's hard to know what Julian thinks. But I thought I was safe for a while.

"Can I go on now?" I asked. Bleys tilted his head in a gesture of assent.

"All right, then. So, I picked up my pace as I walked, hoping to get down to the Great Hall before whatever Galfand had needed us for was over. I hate being late."

I ran down the corridors, down the stairs, heading towards the Hall. I had reached the anteroom to the Hall itself when I noticed something like the green effect again. This time there was nothing

even remotely like a Trump contact intruding on my mind, though. It appeared to be coming through the door to the Hall itself, expanding in an explosion of green flame, rushing outwards...

"I ducked and dived, tried to cover my head, but it hit me like a wall anyway. Everything spun and twisted. I felt myself being buffeted by the boiling air, and I felt chairs and tables smack into me. If I hadn't been tucked up into a ball, I'm sure I would now look much the worse for wear."

Well, worse than I already did look. I was tired and grimy, not having had a chance to clean up properly since... Shit, all of these events had happened since this morning. It felt like so much longer. I wondered how long Julian and Bleys would keep me here after I had finished telling them my story. They hadn't interrupted too much so far, but there were bound to be questions later. I sighed, and took a sip of water before continuing to speak.

I made sure that the blast had fully dissipated before opening my eyes again. I had somehow ended up halfway under a yellow chaise lounge, and it took me a few seconds to extricate myself and give my trousers a perfunctory brush with the back of my hands. It didn't help much, though: a tear ran across my right shin and I feared that this pair was now permanently ruined.

The green blast had not been a normal explosion, I was certain of that. It was only when I stepped forward into the vastness of the Great Hall that I realized quite how far-reaching its effects had been: the Hall, which Moira, Al and I had previously passed through in an undecorated state was now returned to its full ornamental glory. Golden sunlight streamed in through the tall windows, bringing out the velvety sheen on the banners and tapestries that covered the living stone walls. Red carpets covered the floor like the sea at sunset, from which icy marble statues arose like racing dolphins. Although it was too soon to draw firm conclusions, my first guess was that the green blast had somehow transported me to the real Amber.

The commotion at the center of the room was of the greatest interest to me at that point. Moira and Al stood there, looking around and adding to the loud babble of voices, whose general tone seemed to be one of confusion. Galfand was gesturing at an athletic-looking young woman called Jax, whom I had only ever seen in photographs before. My cousin Maya, wearing a purple and black evening dress, her hair up in an elaborate coiffure, was speaking to Jason, my head of security from back in Chaos (so this was where he had gone). Jason was in turn eyeing everyone else warily and keeping tabs on all the exits. He raised an eyebrow when he saw me enter.

Outside of the main group stood Julian and his youngest son

Vestrin, an enthusiastic young officer in the Arden Rangers. Vestrin was looking for someone to salute. He snapped off a quick one when he saw me enter before realizing that I was not in his chain of command. Julian rested a hand on his shoulder and beckoned me closer. I approached the group while he spoke quietly (well, under the noise everyone else was making) to Vestrin, who nodded, saluted his father and jogged away out through the door that led towards the armory.

But was that the real Julian? And was he under the same spell as the others had been? He wasn't involved in any outrageous activities, which had been the main characteristic of the aunts and uncles I had seen in that other version of Amber. When he first noticed me entering the room, his look had been one of competence and control of the situation. My instinct was to trust him and accept him at face value... for the moment.

I took up a position next to Jason while Julian surveyed the motley crew with a critical eye. I was glad, though not surprised, to see that Moira had survived her encounter with Kytralis. She still had a spicy glint in her eye, and was eyeing Maya's formal dress in a distinctly disapproving and predatory manner. Whatever hurry there had been for me to get down here didn't appear so pressing any more. Julian still looked impatient, though. I decided that it would probably be best to tell him my suspicions, my idea that:

"Dara is doing this!"

Maya waved a sheet of paper in the air. Julian stepped forward and snatched it from her hand. "That's a Trump of where she is," she added. The gathering suddenly went very quiet. I was quietly miffed that she had stolen my thunder, but the feeling passed quickly. This was independent corroboration of what I had thus far only suspected. If Dara was making an attempt on Amber, the important thing was that she be stopped.

"Report," Julian said crisply while he looked over the drawing Maya had made.

Maya, clearly uncomfortable about not being at the ready in her more practical Arden Rangers uniform, came to an uneasy attention. She described how she had tried to contact Bleys, her father, by Trump and had missed. "I arrived near a Pattern, but it was out in the open air. There was a cave behind me. And a woman standing at the center of the Pattern." She paused there for a moment longer than was absolutely necessary. Her lower lip was curled down slightly. Was there something she wasn't telling us?

"I didn't recognize her. Gérard told me later that it was Dara, but I had never seen her before. She was wearing a green gem on a chain around her neck, and it glowed. It looked very similar the Jewel of Judgement, only a different color. Each time it pulsed, the

lines of that Pattern moved about a little." She cocked her head at Julian, as if waiting for some additional explanation on his part.

He stroked a thick forefinger over the drawing Maya had given to him and looked her in the eye. "This is the Primal Pattern," he said. I had never heard Julian sounding worried before. It was terrifying.

"Oh shit," Al croaked. My own throat felt completely dry. Dara had attacked Suhuy. Was the green jewel what she had wanted from him? No wonder Merlin and Mandor had been worried, if they had known what the jewel could do. And Merlin had told me that 'I didn't need to know?' I was going to strangle him if he ever dared show me his face again.

Julian, fortunately, still had his wits about him. I had stopped doubting if he was the real thing. It was too much effort to worry about him being a closet fruitcake and the continued survival of the universe at the same time. "This Trump is useless," he declared, handing it back to Maya and turning about on his heel. "Follow me."

Maya was the first to go after Julian. The rest of us overcame our shocked inertia quickly thereafter and jogged along in their wake. Pursue, pursue, pursue... The words of the bird of indeterminate omen echoed through my mind. Power, it had said. We were certainly pursuing power now. Dara at the center of the Primal Pattern (more P's, I registered, not that the bird had spoken those words at all) with a jewel that could alter it? How much more power could possibly be squeezed into one small space?

I wasn't sure I wanted to know. We ran along hallways that were no longer merely familiar. They were the real thing in the real Castle Amber. I had pictured myself arriving home under more auspicious circumstances: taking a long hot bath, getting changed into clean and crisp clothes, having a good meal, then sitting down for an after-dinner liqueur with Random while I delivered Merlin's message. It was a nice thought.

"You know anything about this?" asked Jason, who was keeping pace alongside me.

"I wish I knew more," I said. "I think that the green jewel Dara is wearing is one of Suhuy's little treasures. Merlin had hoped I could warn Random in time for him to do something about it."

Jason tsked as I mentioned the King of Chaos. He doesn't hold a very high opinion of him. "Typical."

I shot him a questioning glance, which he refused to answer. Typical? I got the feeling I was missing something. The possibility occurred to me that an incident such as this one had happened before. Jason had been stationed in Chaos for longer than I. How complete were the security briefings he had been giving me? Something else to worry about later, I thought.

Julian took an abrupt turn to the left. It was obvious where we

were heading: down and back to the Pattern room. He opened the door that led to the stairs and we all tramped through after him. I picked up an already lit lantern from the rack just inside the door and started my descent. Jason had pulled ahead of me, and there was no way I could overtake Maya on the stairs. I would obviously have to wait a while before I could get any more information from him.

Down and down we went. The staircase here in the real Amber was a lot longer than its equivalent I had visited mere hours earlier. As we romped on down, two steps at a time, my leg muscles started protesting at the workout I was giving them. I hoped that this was the last time I would have to make this particular trip today. Eventually, though, we emerged by a deserted guard post at the start of the catacombs. Julian took off like a shot down the first corridor.

I had expected him to head straight for the Pattern Room, where one of us could presumably walk the Pattern, transport to the Primal version and from there pull the rest of us through by Trump. But instead he carried on past the usual turning and led us through a series of interconnected chambers I had never visited before. Occasional flashes of red light and sinister shadows flickered at the edge of my vision, but disappeared as soon as I looked directly at them. The entrances and exits to the maze-like caverns Julian led us through seemed to move, creeping along the walls with a life of their own.

There are many rumors surrounding the caves below Amber. I know now that at least some of them are true. I stuck as close to Julian as I could, because I seriously doubted my ability to find the way back out again. We arrived in a long tunnel that wound gently to the right. As we progressed along it, the underground sounds of blind little beasties and stalactite water dripping into deep pools faded into the distance behind us. Ahead of me, Maya slowed her jog for a moment and took a sharp breath. She looked at me when I caught up alongside her. "We're here," she said, and increased her pace.

I saw light up ahead. Julian and Jason, who had been obscured by the curvature of the tunnel, suddenly came back into view when we rounded the final curve. They were silhouetted against an open cave mouth at the end of a straight section of tunnel. The light that streamed past them was blueish-green, almost turquoise, and it pulsed with a slow beat. We slowed our approach and came to a halt beside the two men.

The cave led out onto a short, rocky slope that led down to a wide open space. The sky was a deep, dark blue, and it joined invisibly with the sea in the distance. I had never expected to see this place with my own eyes. And not even in my wildest dreams did it look like

this.

The Primal Pattern was a scrambled mess. The only resemblance it bore to the Pattern under Amber was its general curving towards an open space at the center. And there at the center stood Dara in a rather fetching red outfit. She was facing to our right and away from us. The jewel around her neck glowed a poisonous green. Each time it brightened, the lines of the Pattern came alive and squirmed like a nest of hungry snakes.

"Ideas, anyone?" Al asked.

Julian said nothing. His concentration was focussed on Dara and the green glow, whose pulse seemed to be increasing in frequency. She showed no signs of having noticed us.

I took a step forward out of the cave. "Beck," Jason hissed quietly, grabbing me by the shoulder. "Do you know what you're doing?"

"Yes." Well, no, not really. I had a vague idea that I might be able to talk to her, distract her so that someone else could, somehow, get her off the Pattern. I had no idea how one would go about removing her, but that was somebody else's problem. All I knew was that the pulse was getting brighter and faster, and that it didn't look like we had much time any more. "Just make sure you're ready to make a move," I told Jason.

He took back his hand. "What move?" He whispered.

"You'll know," I replied, and made my way down the slope. Move? What was I talking about? I sure hoped that Julian wasn't flaking out on us. He looked like a statue, facing the Pattern. A caged beast prowled behind his eyes.

I didn't want to get too close to the Pattern. It occasionally reached out beyond the confines of its old form with pseudopod-like extensions. I had no particular desire to get snapped up by a mad, hungry Pattern.

"My lady Dara," I called. Now I had to be really careful. Dara didn't like me. I had dealt with her through her secretary, and occasionally Merlin passed on the odd message that didn't really want to go through diplomatic channels, but she had taken an immediate dislike to me on the first (and only) time I had met her. How to approach this? Very sensitively.

I noticed a slight twitch in her right eye, and the pulse of the jewel missed about half a beat. She knew I was there, but she didn't want to acknowledge me.

"Princess Dara," I called again as I walked round the perimeter of the Pattern to put myself fully in her field of vision. Now she would have to recognize my presence, even if it was just by turning away from me. I looked upon her visage and found her gaze to be almost unnaturally serene. Maybe she was in a good mood. "Your son Merlin told me that you had left your palace back in Chaos," I

continued.

A small wrinkle appeared on her peaceful brow when I spoke Merlin's name, and finally she looked me in the eye. At last! Contact! I pushed on: "Are you aware that Suhuy has had an accident? He was asking after you..."

Maybe that last gambit had been a mistake. Her sunny expression disappeared, to be replaced by a vision of pure rage. The jewel pulsed very rapidly three times, then pumped itself up to a burning glow.

"Go away!" She cried, and thrust her arms out. Green flame boiled forth from her rigid fingertips and rushed towards me in a ball of lightning. I managed to yelp the first syllable of a one-word defensive spell before the energy hit me like a wounded bear. The blast knocked me clean off my feet. As I flew back, I had time to be glad that while I had pretty much ignored my magic tutors as a child, I did remember the rudiments of magic my father had taught me. When I smacked into it, the mountain slope behind me still felt damn hard, though.

As I lay there, gasping for breath and struggling to remember where my feet were, I heard an angry voice shouting at full volume. I pushed myself up onto my elbows and watched as Moira stomped up to the edge of the Pattern. "You stupid bitch!" She yelled at Dara. "He was only trying to speak with you! They obviously don't teach you manners out there in the Courts. Now I don't know what you're trying to do out there, but has it occurred to you that we might like a say in the matter? Is there any way you can get off your high horse so we can discuss this?"

Dara had turned her complete attention to Moira. The anger in her face had subsided, only to be replaced by a look of arrogant amusement. I dreaded what was going to happen next, but the jewel didn't rush itself into the rapid pulsing state that had preceded her attack on me. Maybe it needed to rebuild its energy between discharges. It struck me that maybe Moira was trying to buy me some time to gather my strength for a second attempt at distracting her. A diversion for the diversion?

I hauled myself up onto my feet, and with a hand on the hollow of my aching back I limped back to the Pattern. There had to be a better way to approach her, and maybe Moira had the right idea. There had to be a reason Dara was trying to take over the Primal Pattern, if that was indeed what she was doing. Sure, she had a deep-rooted hatred of Amber and everyone from this end of the universe, but that didn't fully explain what she was doing to the Pattern. She wasn't insane. There had to be another reason, an additional desire that was pushing her into these actions at this particular time. This was what I had to find out from her. Maybe then I stood a chance.

"Princess Dara," I called once more. She snapped her attention away from Moira and back towards me. I caught a concerned look from Moira before I re-focussed all of my attention on Dara. "Forget Amber," I said. "Forget the Courts, forget Merlin and Suhuy and all the others. Lets just talk, you and me." Her eyes narrowed slightly, but the jewel continued to pulse.

"What do you want?" I said. Dara didn't reply. "I want to know what you want for yourself.

"I know you hate Amber. Hell, we all do. Amber's just a great big sprawling father-figure to us all. We get sucked up into its plans and spat out when it has no further use for us. Why do you think I requested an appointment in Chaos? Freedom, that's why.

"But I don't think that hatred, or even dislikes are the prime motivations in our lives. Hatred can only push you away from a goal, in any old direction. You, Dara, you are doing something more specific. You're being drawn towards something in particular. You have a burning desire, you want something just for yourself, and damn all appearances and Courtly propaganda straight into the Abyss.

"What is it, Dara? What do you want? Tell me. I can help you get it." The smile on her face had drifted into a more neutral expression. The jewel's pulsing had stopped accelerating. It was still flashing pretty fast, but I knew that I had her attention. She was listening to what I had to say, and damn it, she was hooked.

I licked my lips and took a quick look around the Pattern. Its lines rustled and wriggled. Moira had retreated somewhat, and Julian still stood in the cave mouth, but the others had disappeared from sight. More time, more time... I had to keep Dara on the line.

"Whatever it is you're doing with the Pattern, I know it must be tiring," I continued. "There might be an easier way. You know what you want. We can work something out. All you have to do is talk to me."

Was she relenting? Did her head just move a fraction to the side? My heart raced, my blood pounded. She seemed to be moving in slow motion when her lips parted and her mouth opened. What would she say? Would she tell me or slam me again? I braced myself for a shock of either kind.

Flash.

A sparkle of bright orange from a rocky outcrop in the distance. My hand jerked up in a warding gesture before I realized that the light had not come from her, but from behind her. I saw surprise register in Dara's eyes before the crack of the gunshot reached us and she was knocked forward by the force of the sniper's bullet. She clutched her chest and caught her balance just in time to prevent her from stumbling onto the Pattern's innermost curve. A gurgle

replaced the breath she tried to catch, and a red far deeper and more liquid than the scarlet of her clothes dribbled over her hands and suffused her tunic.

Get out of there! I wanted to scream, but my mouth was frozen open in a silent gape of horror. She must have walked the Pattern to get to the center. All she had to do was wish herself away!

She staggered back, away from the line, until the second shot caught her high on the left side. Her shoulder burst open in an explosion of blood, sending her into an slow spin that pushed her off her feet. The third shot caught her in the stomach before she hit the ground.

Blood ran in slow rivers from her twitching body. The red liquid trickled onto the lines of the Pattern, joining the isolated spatters and droplets that the bullets had showered from her body on impact. Where the fluids came to rest, they bubbled and smoked, turning black with an ominous hissing sound.

A rainbow glow enveloped the dying Princess, and she vanished from the Pattern. With a last rattle, the lines of the Pattern stopped their twitching and reverted to their natural patient blue state.

Someone, some idiot, had shot a daughter of the Blood at the center of the Primal Pattern. I stood there, stunned at the awesome stupidity of that move. Aside from that, they had interrupted my negotiations, which might have drawn her off the Pattern of her own accord. We might yet have come to some agreement that could have resolved this matter without any bloodshed. She had been listening to me at the end! She had wanted to say something to me! Whether fair or foul, I would now never know.

My heart was wrapped in ice. Dara was also Merlin's mother. And he would blame me for not having tried hard enough.

Eventually, the other noises around me made their way through to my brain. On the far side of the Pattern, Moira had already taken off into the distance, heading for the sniper's location. Clearly she didn't think that the shooting had been a good idea, either. Up by the cave mouth, several voices clamored for attention. Foremost among them was Maya's. She had blood on her hands, all over her dress and some on her face too. Jason and Al stood by her, blocking my view of whatever it was on the ground they were looking at.

Wearily, I trudged back up the slope to meet them. When I got close enough, I saw that the figure on the ground was Dara. Her form was somewhat shape-shifted, but clearly not enough to save her from the awesome wounds the bullets had inflicted on her. Maya's Trump drawing lay on the ground next to her. She must have used it to pull Dara through from the center, to stop her blood from doing any more damage. Julian had been wrong about it being useless.

I looked back at the Pattern. The hissing sound had grown louder, and the sky above the Pattern was darkening. Clouds rushed in from the horizon to gather in a swirling hurricane mass above us. Dara's blood had not flowed much further out than the two innermost curves of the Pattern, but those sections were almost completely obliterated by a deathly, hypnotic blackness.

"So what do we do with it?" Maya asked. I tore my gaze away from the Pattern. She was holding up Dara's green jewel by its golden chain. It no longer pulsed, or even glowed. This close up, it looked almost identical to the Jewel of Judgement.

The sound of footsteps rushing along the tunnel made us all look up. Al shone his lamp into the darkness, and illuminated Bleys and Fiona running towards us. Fiona looked a lot more sober and serious than when I had last seen her, but she was pale as a sheet. She flashed me a disconcerted look before Maya's jewel caught her attention.

"Dad!" Maya called. Bleys smiled at her then walked over to Julian, who was leaning against the cave wall and riffling through his deck of Trumps.

"I suggest you get that thing as far away as possible," Fiona said to Maya. Her gaze flickered back and forth between the jewel and the storm gathering above the damaged Pattern. A strong gust of wind caught my shirt and cooled my sweaty skin with its icy fingers. Lightning flashed along the base of the clouds, tracing a deadly circuit of electrical energy.

"I don't think it's such a good idea for us to be hanging around here, either," I said. This gained me a sarcastic look or two.

"Would Chaos do?" Maya said? "I have a Trump of our Embassy there."

"Perfect," Fiona said. I wasn't too sure, myself.

The green jewel was probably Suhuy's property, so it ought to be returned. But on the other hand, maybe it could be put to use in averting the disaster that looked like it was about to happen right here. Fiona had sounded resolute, though, and I figured that she knew more about it than I did. But it seemed like a bad idea to let Maya go there on her own.

"Jason," I said. "Will you go with her?" He nodded. Maya had already shuffled out a Trump and was concentrating on it. She held the jewel tightly in her left hand, the gold chain wrapped around her wrist. Jason put his hand on her shoulder and stared at the Trump as well. I thought I saw the jewel glowing faintly before they disappeared in a rainbow glow, but it was probably just my imagination.

The wind at our backs was getting stronger, and we retreated inside the cave. Fiona walked over to Bleys and Julian, who were

looking impatient.

"Hey, where'd Jax go?" Al said. Indeed, the athletic young lady was nowhere to be seen. I hadn't seen Galfand for a while, either. I gritted my teeth at the thought that one of them might have shot Dara. Moments later, though, Jax emerged from the darkness within the cave. She headed straight for Bleys and handed him something that blinked red in the available light.

"Special delivery," she said. Bleys accepted the item and held it up to his eye. The real Jewel of Judgement twirled lazily at the end of a heavy chain.

He gazed into its depths for a minute before pulling a face and tucking it away in a pocket. "Damn," he said to Fiona. "You're right. I can't do anything with it."

The storm outside was reaching epic proportions. Dust swirled cartoon-like in the miniature tornadoes that had touched down around the Pattern. The Pattern itself was thrumming audibly, and shooting out blue crackles to the electrified clouds above it.

"Maya?" Fiona suggested.

"Probably," Bleys said. He reached into another pocket and pulled out a Trump. After a few seconds of concentration, he held out his hand and pulled Maya back through to him. She had wiped most of the blood from her face and hands, but still looked a little bedraggled. Jason was no longer with her. I was surprised that Bleys had managed to get hold of her so quickly. For me, at least, Trumping all the way from Amber to Chaos takes an enormous effort. Maybe the Pattern's disfigured state had something to do with it.

"Bring the Pattern to mind," Bleys ordered her, and handed her the Jewel. Maya looked at it warily. Fiona placed a hand on her shoulder and led her out of the cave and into the furious winds. The storm parted slightly and closed again behind them as they departed the shelter. They walked down towards the Pattern in a protective bubble. The winds still tugged at them within their portable shelter, but with nowhere near the strength of the hurricane that raged around them.

"She's going to repair the Pattern," Bleys said to Al and me. He beckoned us over to where he and Julian stood. "But she won't be able to do it alone, at least not towards the center. When Fiona gets back, we shall link our minds. I'll be able to channel some of our strength into her."

I didn't feel like I had much strength in me any more. But if this was the only way, I would give her all I had left.

Down by the Pattern, Maya was taking her first, shaky steps on the long walk towards the center. Fiona, no longer within the Jewel's protective reach, was being tossed about by the raging storm. Her hair was all over the place, and her dress was tangling around

her legs. She struggled back up to the cave. I held my hand out to her when she was close enough and pulled her in. A fair breeze had picked up in here as well, flowing from the interior of the cave towards the low-pressure area outside.

Fiona straightened her dress with her free hand and brushed some red hair out of her face. "Are you ready?" she asked Bleys. He nodded and reached out his hand. Fiona took it. Julian took his other hand, and Al and Jax linked up with the chain at his end. I hoped that Moira was all right, out there.

At first I was a bit wary about letting Bleys take control of my mind, but a quick glance at Maya struggling on the Pattern outside was enough to convince me to open up. I closed my eyes and evaluated my own internal energies. I was tired, I was drained, but there was still a hint of a reserve. How long it would last, I did not know. I resolved to hold back a bit at first and save some for later, when Maya hit the damaged sections.

"Concentrate on the Pattern," Bleys said. His voice was almost entirely eaten up by the noise of the storm.

Blue lines... Powerful blue lines. I imagined myself surveying the Pattern from a point high above it. It came clear in my mind, its intricate swirls swimming into focus like parts of a vivid dream. An ugly black stain lurked upon its breast.

There, halfway along the outside curve, someone was walking on the Pattern. I floated down and saw that it was Maya. She looked worried.

I could feel other people around me. Ghostly shapes shimmered in the air of my mind, taking the form of Bleys and Fiona. "You can do it," their ethereal voices whispered. Maya seemed to take heart.

She passed through the first veil, struggling against pain and fear as she did so. The Bleys-ghost drifted closer to her and placed its hand on her forehead. The vague purplish aura that surrounded her brightened, and she took the next few steps with increased vigor. She had placed the Jewel's chain around her neck and was holding the gem itself up to her eye. It pulsed a heady crimson in time with her heartbeat, which I could feel through the link with the Bleys-ghost.

Second veil. As she pushed onwards, the Fiona-ghost sank lower to join the Bleys-ghost in laying a hand on Maya's head. Again, there was a brightening in her aura as she drew strength from us. I felt somewhat weakened, as if I myself was walking the Pattern. My own real body was breathing heavily, but it felt terribly distant now. I vaguely wondered what would happen if the link Bleys had forged were to collapse... Would I be stranded out here in this imaginary world, my soulless body left behind on the cave floor?

I returned my thoughts to Maya. I felt every step she took as

though my own feet were doing the walking. Her legs burned with fatigue, and her vision was blurring from having to keep her eye trained on the Jewel. She knew her goal. She was determined to make it, but with each step her momentum drained from her faster than we could replenish it...

Julian's ghostly form reached down from above and placed a translucent finger on Maya's shoulder. The energy flux that followed was somewhat unbalanced, but she steadied herself and carried on. The purple glow flared and she faltered a few steps later. Reaching back to feel my physical body was becoming harder. It stood at the end of an infinite red-lit corridor, running for all it was worth... Only to stay in the same place. My feet hammered, my breath was ragged...

Go on! I forced myself!

Jax and Al floated with me, their ghostly images fading slowly... Bleys, Julian and Fiona looked like they were being pushed away from Maya... Their ghosts held on to her with both hands... A vast spirit wind sheared across their bodies, but still they held...

Maya was coming up on the final veil, and the first of the black holes. Would all our strength be enough to get her through it? All around me I could feel nothing but exhaustion. Bleys was at the point of letting go. "Hold on!" I tried to shout, but I don't think any of them heard me... The demon wind that hurtled through our minds and our imaginations built itself up to a whistle... a shriek... a wail... A blackness circled round the outside of my vision, creeping inward... The noise increased beyond measure... All that was left at the center of my mind was Maya, pushing onwards, feeling us slipping away and calling for help...

We broke.

I sank to the floor, my heart screaming for mercy, my lungs on the verge of collapse. The noise no longer assaulted my mind directly, though. The storm beyond the cave was loud, but not unbearable. A splash of rain blew into the cave, onto my face. I opened my eyes.

Julian, Fiona and Bleys lay sprawled against the opposite wall of the cave. For a moment I thought they were dead, but then I saw their chests heaving up and down like jackhammers, and it was clear they were merely unconscious. Jax and Al had been blown halfway out of the cave. As my own breathing steadied, I raised myself on wobbly elbows and crawled towards the two of them.

I hardly dared to look outside. I feared the worst for Maya. If even Bleys had thought that she couldn't make it on her own...

But no! There she was, nearing the center with each step!

Or... was that...? A curtain of rain washed in front of the cave, then cleared. A second person was walking behind Maya, with one

hand on her shoulder. A slender figure, not too tall... The rain and dark clouds were leeching all the color from the scene. Practically the only illumination came from the electric blue glow of the Pattern, which was looking a lot healthier than it had done before Maya started her gargantuan task. She had nearly made it! With the help of that mystery figure... Who could possibly have got out there to join her?

There were only a few more paces to go now. Maya and her mysterious helper struggled through the last of them. Two more... one more... The final traces of Dara's blackened blood melted underneath their feet, revealing lines of pure blue... Then they were through.

Maya collapsed into a crumpled heap at the center. The second figure sat down and leaned over her. This mysterious helper was obviously tired as well. But who could it be? The form looked male, but I couldn't be sure. The rain swirled and gusted between me and them, making it hard to make out much of anything. The Jewel still glowed a clear red, though.

I heard a vague stirring behind me. Julian moaned slightly and moved his arm, but showed no other signs of coming round.

I had to know who was out there with Maya. My legs didn't feel up to much, so I crawled out of the cave. The wind and rain lashed at me, and I felt my shirt ripping in places where I grazed my elbows and stomach on the rocks of the slope. The clouds above the Pattern appeared to be relaxing their manic swirl. The electrical activity had burned itself out with the healing of the Pattern. On the whole, it looked like things were going to be fine.

But was Maya all right? Had the mysterious figure forced too much out of her? I crawled even closer to the Pattern. The figure looked my way, and pulled back a little. It reached down over Maya and pulled her up into a sitting position before putting its shoulder under her and hoisting her up in a fireman's lift. Her legs and arms dangled like a rag doll's.

The rain was starting to subside now, and the light was getting better. I could see that the figure wore green. The hips were not those of a woman. He turned towards me, and for the first time I got a clear view of his face.

"Brand?" I croaked.

He grinned at me proudly, gave me a happy thumbs-up sign, and disappeared.

The Great Hall was silent. The stark blue light of a waning moon fell through the windows and mixed on the floor with the burnished glow of the fading wall-hung torches. A few lonely taco crumbs lay on the silver serving plate next to the empty green bottles of wine I had watched Bleys and—to a lesser extent—Julian finish off over the

course of the evening. Most of the castle was asleep by now. The servants on night shift would still be up and about, but they were discreet enough not to interrupt our cozy little soiree.

Julian's face was stony. Bleys rested his left elbow on the table and proceeded to stroke his beard thoughtfully with thumb and forefinger. His eyes were distant.

"You know the rest," I said. "You two were the first to wake up." I declined to mention that it had taken a few minutes for them to rouse themselves. I had spent that time sitting in a corner and watching Fiona sleep. She had looked young, exhausted, placid... utterly beautiful.

When Bleys had finally stirred, the sky outside above the Pattern had cleared, and the wind had dropped to a faint whisper. The temperature had begun to rise slowly. I hadn't even realized how cold it had become until feeling had started to return to the tips of my fingers, bringing with it an annoying case of pins and needles.

"Moira got back just after I awoke," Julian said. "Did she find Galfand?"

I nodded. "He was the one who shot Dara," I said. Bleys ignored us, lost in thoughts, or perhaps in a drunken stupor. I didn't really care much any more. I was exhausted, and I wanted to go to bed.

"What did she do with him?"

I gave Julian a grim smile. Moira had been sweaty from exertion when she had returned to the cave, and there had been blood stains all along the sleeve of her sword arm. Whose blood? I couldn't possibly say. "She never told me. You'll have to ask her yourself. I'm sure she'll tell you. You are her father, after all."

"Some other time," Julian grunted. "She left before I could get a word in."

I shrugged, and tipped my head at Bleys. "Should we get him to bed?"

"In a moment. What did Merlin say when you got back here?"

"Merlin?" I sat back in my chair and sighed.

Jason had Trumped me soon after everyone was up and about again down by the Primal Pattern. He had returned from Chaos with Merlin. He had pulled me through to the Great Hall upstairs, which I hadn't left since then. "Well, I was angry with him at first, because he hadn't told me about Suhuy's jewel. And I had expected him to be angry with me when I told him that his mother was dead. But he took it all with complete equanimity. He even seemed a little impatient, like he wanted to be off someplace else, doing other things."

"Did you ask Jason what he did with the jewel?"

"No." I pinched the bridge of my nose, and closed my eyes for a moment. "I had other things on my mind. A nurse from the

infirmary arrived to tell us that Maya was recovering down there, and then Merlin pointed Caine out to me."

Caine. I turned round to look at him. A servant must have moved the chair he was sitting in to the edge of the Hall. Well, he had been cluttering the place up. There was no change in his condition. His eyes were still open, staring blankly at the walls. If he was breathing, he was doing it so slowly and shallowly as to be unnoticeable. Whatever was wrong with him, it wasn't getting any worse. He could wait till morning.

I stood up and stretched my back. It crackled with stiffness, and felt tender in far too many places. My throat felt sore from talking too much. My head swam with fatigue.

"I really have to go to bed now," I said.

Julian nodded and stood up also. "Bleys?" he said to his brother. There was no reaction. "Bleys?" He repeated, this time reaching over to take a hold of Bleys' wrist.

Bleys' arm, which had been supporting his head, slipped out from underneath Julian's grip. His body slumped forward, and his head flopped onto the table, narrowly missing the goblet he had been drinking from all evening. He started snoring, loudly.

Julian looked at me with a rare friendly smile on his face. I was too tired to laugh, but my lips turned up at the corners anyway. "Leave him," he said. He turned his back to me and walked towards the far door.

"Goodnight, uncle," I called to him as he left.

My own rooms are on the other side of the castle. As I walked, slowly and with great effort, in their general direction, I reflected on the one thing I hadn't told Bleys and Julian. Apart from Fiona, that is. (Would Fiona still be awake this late? Would she object to a quick visit? What did she think of me now, out of her earlier trance...)

There had been something odd about the Primal Pattern after Brand had helped Maya re-inscribe it. I had looked at it for a while before Bleys had woken up down there, and there was something about those last few lines near the center, where the damage had been. But I couldn't place my finger on it. It was like there was a blind spot in my brain that covered any previous memory of the shape of the Pattern.

They had put the Pattern back together properly, hadn't they? I trudged up the final flight of stairs and turned down the corridor where my old rooms lay. A servant had told me earlier that she would clean the place and turn the bed down for me. I hoped that she had also left the door open, because somewhere along the line I had lost my keys.

I approached my door on the right hand wall and numbly pushed it open. The room was warm, and the bed looked soft and

inviting. I owed it to myself to get undressed before slipping under the covers. My clothes almost fell apart at the seams as I took them off. The sensation of nakedness was almost unbearably pleasant. I pulled on a fresh pair of boxers before collapsing onto the mattress. Bed... warm... home...

One tiny thought passed through my brain before sleep overtook me completely, though.

Didn't the door to my room used to be on the *left* wall?

Shards of My Mind

by Cathy Klessig, ©1997

*From the Amber Scenario, "Shard: Stretched Across Lies"
created and run by Mike Sutton and Mark Roemer*

It was raining, steady and cold, at the edge of the Valley of Deceit. I looked out over the valley—or anyway, in the direction the ground sloped downward. It was deep twilight, just enough light to pick your steps, never getting darker or brighter. Downslope was just rain on rain, dark on dark.

"How do I get to Shard?" I asked the caravan master.

He was haggling with a merchant, who'd come out of the crowd of wet tents to our left. Everything was wet: we'd reached the point where we all ignored it. My voice cut into their discussion of the water-repelling properties of some bales of oiled silk, and they both looked at me.

The other passengers were watching, as well. There were six of us, all fairly mean-looking specimens...which might've had something to do with the sudden silence when I spoke up. Not that the caravan master scared easily. Nobody could think that, who'd seen the country he'd guided us through.

He favored us with the sour expression of a man who'd been paid (in his opinion) too damn little money by too many damn fools who wanted to go to Shard.

"It's over there," he said, waving a hand in the direction I'd been looking before. "There's a lake, and Shard's on an island in the middle. If it ever quit raining, or the sun ever came up, we could probably see it from here." He spat. "If."

"So I just start walking?"

The merchant spoke up, with a snicker. "You wanna die?"

"Not particularly."

"Then don't go into the Valley of Deceit without a guide. Nothing's the way it seems. You can fall right through what looks like solid ground." He pointed toward the tents. "Guides for hire over there."

I looked around at my fellow travelers. They were looking back at me, and at each other: five men and something with tentacles, all dripping wet, all with guarded, searching eyes. I

suppose we were each hoping the others had a better idea.

After a silent minute, we all turned away toward the lights and the smell of soggy canvas.

No one wonders where he got his name, until he can't remember.

For the journey to Shard, I called myself Darien. I seldom use the same name or face for as much as a month. I remember my real name...but the next time I speak it aloud will be the first in my memory.

So call me Darien. I can fight, work, perform the usual bodily functions. I know several languages, including the Thari of the Courts of Chaos. If I'm ever caught in the Courts of Chaos, I will be killed.

That's about it. That's what I know.

Someone did this to me. The pattern of things I know versus things I don't know shows intent. But whose, and why?

I had to know. I'd had no trouble making a living, since the day I'd found myself in a field near a city called Azhrall. There were always ways to get money, things to do. And it wasn't just revenge, and it wasn't the nagging feeling that the fallout (if any) from an unknown past is likely to strike from your blind side. Revenge is often stupid, and life is never safe. But I couldn't forget about the Courts of Chaos. Who gave me the name I never use? Who wiped my memory? Why?

Walking away wasn't really an option, though I tried for a long time. I was caught between the things I couldn't remember and the things I couldn't forget.

I picked the guide for his eyes. He was big, even sitting down with his back to the side of a tent that was also a tavern. He looked tough. But long-term lovers and people you trust with your life should never be picked on looks alone.

What sold me on this guide was the little smile in his eyes, like he figured he could handle whatever came next. And when I looked him over he looked straight back, and the smile never wavered. Most people, if you really look at them, will either flinch or frown.

"Good night," he said, in the tone most people use for 'good morning'. But there was never any morning at the edge of the Valley of Deceit.



"Good night," I answered. "I hear you're a guide."

"That's right." His tone was quiet, clean, simple.

"Have you taken people into Shard before?"

"Yes."

"Did you get them through?"

"Yes."

"Will you take me?"

The smile widened a little. "What are you offering?"

I named a sum of money, about equal to a month's rent on a small apartment in a bad part of town.

"Thrice that," he said.

I pulled it out, and put it on the counter. What the hell? I still had some left over. And I've never had trouble getting hold of money.

He started counting it.

"What about the boat trip?" I asked.

He glanced up. "That's included. So is a drink at the bar. We leave in half an hour."

So I had a drink, while the others talked to the guide.

Barak and Neslund, who tended to stick together, also paid with money. But Jacob offered a secret.

The guide's smile broadened. "You learn quickly."

Jacob leaned forward, and whispered in the guide's ear.

The guide nodded happily. "All right. Go get your drink."

I'd noticed Jacob before, on the trip. He was smart: smart enough to figure out some things, just from the rumors about Shard. (Mother of secrets... city of lies... most people who go to Shard never come back, but those who return often know strange things.)

Jacob was impulsive, though. If secrets were better than money, why part with one so early? No one has an infinite number of secrets. Still, Jacob looked like the pick of this group, if I needed an ally.

Another man, a big barbarian type named Ungus, offered to pay with a song. This, too, was accepted. He proceeded to sing, in a voice that made the canvas vibrate on its poles, a song about the joys of kicking butt. A bunch of other barbarians sat nearby, and they cheered and stomped and pounded their table with tankards and fists.

When it was over the guide nodded, and gestured to the bar. The other barbarians crowded around, to drink with Ungus and pound him on the shoulder.

He might not be a bad ally, either. He'd been playing big, dumb and silent on the trip into Shard. But of the whole group, he'd probably done the best job of parting with something he could afford. Some people assume anyone who's big and wears a lot of fur is stupid. If you meet one who's bright enough to *use* that attitude, watch out.

All five humans had now made their bargains with the guide. The sixth traveler, Zardash of the sleek, dark shape and many tentacles, was nowhere to be seen. Was he planning to try and follow us into Shard?

No. He swooped suddenly into the tent, came to a landing like a flying squirrel in front of the guide's table, stood up and stalked forward.

Zardash's test was flashier than mine, but effective. The guide passed it by not flinching. I couldn't even see what he planned to do if Zardash advanced too far. I could only see he was ready.

Zardash stopped, two paces short of the table. The tips of his tentacles moved in slow, random-looking curves, but the rest of him stayed dead still.

"Will you take me into Shard?" he asked in his soft, vague voice.

"And how will you pay me?" asked the guide.

Zardash paused a long moment. "What does it mean, pay?"

Was he bullshitting, I wondered? Or had he really gotten the caravan master to bring him here for free? The caravan master had struck me as the type who'd charge to get his own grandmother out of a burning building. Maybe Zardash had "paid" by guarding the caravan: he lurked a lot, and I never saw him sleep. Personally, I can turn into weirder things than Zardash without working up a sweat. But he'd look pretty scary to the average bandit.

"Pay means that I give you something: I take you into Shard," said the guide. "And you give me something in return."

"What you want?"

The guide shrugged a little. "Money. Songs. Secrets."

"Don't have money. Don't know song. Secret...I can do *this*." Suddenly, he had the form of a tired-looking old man. "Killed this man, in village where I first woke up. Killed everybody. They have legend of creature like me: Destroyer. So that must be me: Zardash Destroyer."

"Where was this?" asked the guide.

Zardash described a place far to the west and north.

"That'll do," said the guide, waving him toward the bar.

I wondered then if Zardash was really very bright, to tell his secret in front of everybody. Or was he simply that alien? Any way you looked at it, he was probably trouble. But was he more trouble for us or against us? That was the question.

The Valley of Deceit belies everything but its name. If you swing your arm, you may find it caught in the branches of an invisible tree. Other times, you can walk right through underbrush that looks as solid and thorny as your landlord's heart.

Once, the guide pulled somebody off the path, just in time to avoid a geyser. We could feel the heat and the slight spray. We could smell sulphur. But we couldn't see so much as a heat-ripple in the air.

We got through, though. The guide was worth everything I'd paid him. He even gave us a free bit of advice, as we waited to board the ferryboat.

"Remember, it's all right to sleep in any vacant building. You'll find money-changers near the docks, who can change your outland money into the minor currency of Shard." He held up a small coin made of smooth, black stone. No one asked about the major currency. Anyone who hadn't guessed it by this time just wasn't paying attention.

As the boat pulled away, I stared down into the water. The rain made the mirror-black surface of the lake dance like living onyx. I had the weird feeling that if only the raindrops would deform that dark mirror in precisely the right way, my past would be reflected there, and I wouldn't need to go to Shard at all. But it had never been that simple....

I finally headed for the Courts of Chaos. As the Shadows got weirder, I couldn't help thinking the only thing that made less sense than the Courts of Chaos was for me to go there. But prolonged meditation had yielded only the knowledge that my memory had been wiped, not just suppressed. No amount of self-exploration would retrieve what my skull no longer held.

Getting to the Courts was far from easy, since I lacked that slippery, treacherous, but oh-so-useful ability known as

Logrus. I got through by changing myself into various creatures that could traverse Shadow. I even learned to change into a cloud of charged particles, and use the inter-Shadow computer networks as highways... but that's immaterial.

On a boulevard in Mechlerin, near the edge of the Black Zone, I met a couple of cops. They were walking along, minding other people's business as their job description directed. When they came within half a block, they both stopped and turned and stared at me.

I stared back, caught the eyes of one, and directed him firmly: 'You've got better places to be right now.' His eyes slipped a little out of focus, and he walked briskly away. With any luck, I'd be long gone by the time it occurred to him that he really didn't know where the hell he was going.

His partner started to call after him. But I made a quick movement that drew his eyes back to me. Catching his gaze, I gave him the same suggestion. But he blinked, shrugged it off, and reached for his pocket. Radio? Police whistle? Weapon? I didn't want to know.

Hurrying across the street, I got him to look at me again. Once more I made the contact—closer this time, stronger—and put everything I had into, 'You Have To Leave, Right Now!'

The cop blinked and shook his head, confused. But he didn't start walking. He really was a tough one. I made a quick mental note of his badge number, turned, and sprinted around the corner before he could refocus.

Later, I hacked into the cops' computer and found the report he'd turned in: "I thought I saw someone with a brand on Vector between Draza and Reef. But when I looked again, I didn't see anyone."

I did some research on this "brand." It turned out to be a psychic procedure for marking a mind, in such a way that it would broadcast a specific signal. Since it was a broadcast signal, no mental contact was required to read it. Brands were applied to outlaws from the Courts of Chaos. Anyone who came into the Black Zone with a brand was to be killed on sight.

I left that Shadow via the computer net, and worked my way further towards Chaos. And I learned some more things, none of them reassuring:

- 1. The computer nets near the Courts were thick with nasty magical traps, bound demonic entities, and*

countermeasures ranging from annoying to fatal.

2. Someone bearing my real name had been outlawed at about the correct time...but further information was classified.

3. The defenses around classified data made the countermeasures I'd already seen look like kids' toys.

4. How to apply or remove a brand was classified, too.

It was time to retreat, and come back when I knew more about computers. You don't belong on the concert stage, till you've had lots of practice and tried out your act in the sticks. But this computer-snooping was really for me, I could see that, so I didn't mind. I hadn't had this much fun at any time within my memory.

I did pick up one interesting fragment, however...speaking of knowing more. A Lord of Chaos named Gwys had been outlawed, a long time ago, and had last been heard of heading for a city named Shard. The writer of the file speculated that Gwys might have gone to Shard in the hope of recovering his memory.

I referenced all the legends I could find about Shard, Mother of Secrets. Mostly, people who went looking for Shard simply never came back. But every once in a while, someone claiming to have visited Shard showed knowledge that had been assumed to be lost beyond recall.

Beyond recall. I made careful note of each fragmentary hint that might point to Shard's location in Shadow.

Shard just got blacker, as we got close. It was all black stone, slick with rain. When we landed and found a money-changer, the coins were actually a less pure form of the same stone. Everywhere, the same stone: never a tree, not so much as a patch of mud.

"I wonder how they prevent counterfeiting?" I mused aloud as we moved on.

"Maybe this is the only kind that's soft enough to work," suggested someone.

I wasn't the only one in the group whose thoughts ran to criminal activity, it seemed...

I wouldn't really call it trust, but we found ourselves sticking together as we walked through the streets. The rain pat-a-patted on the pavement, the buildings, us. Everyone we passed looked hard, purposeful...even the women. Yes,

women, but never a child. No one you could class as a noncombatant.

The one exception was Zardash, in his old-man form. He looked like the breeze could knock him over. But that, of course, was a lie. "Killed everybody," he'd said, as if it were nothing. No wonder if he called himself Destroyer. (Had his species developed shape-shift to attract prey by mimicry? The universe is so huge, so fascinating in its complex variety: what a shame if I died with so much left unlearned.)

Laughter and song and butter-yellow light spilled out of a doorway to our right.

"A bar!" cried Jacob eagerly. "Come on!"

"Hey!" I protested. "We don't need to party. We need to find a place to stay, and then—"

"We *need* to find out what's going *on*," Jacob corrected with a smile. "And do you know any better place to do that than in a bar?"

I nodded, struck by his logic. Sometimes, I am actually too goal-directed for my own good.

"You're right," I conceded. "Let's go."

After the dark streets where everyone moved in grim silence, the bar was an explosion of light and noise. Paneling covered the omnipresent black walls. Bright fires drove out the dank chill. Electric lamps shone on the hundred or so patrons—still tough and dangerous, but with smiles on their faces and drinks in their hands. After a small dose of Shard, I could already see how people would pay to hang out here.

We bought drinks and food. Zardash in particular seemed determined to prove that the cliché for gluttony, "You eat like a shape-shifter," had been coined for him alone. I didn't see what arrangement he made with the girls behind the counter, but he must have offered them something. The staff looked almost as dangerous as the patrons.

About half the people in the room were crowded around a woman who sat on a stool that was perched on one of the tables. Her businesslike mail-shirt still managed to hint at a body best described as magnificent. It was hard to say whether her hair or her smile was more like the sunshine Shard never saw.

Jacob and I were still sticking together, watching each

other's backs while trying not to be too obvious about it. He stopped a man, and pointed to the woman on the table. "Who is she, and what's she doing up there?"

The man shrugged. "That's Angelica. She's just finished a Vault run, so this is her party."

"Vault run?" Jacob repeated, raising his eyebrows.

The man suddenly looked Jacob over, and then me, with sharp, narrowed eyes. "You're new in Shard, aren't you?" he asked. "Why should I tell *you*?" And, without waiting for an answer, he melted away into the crowd.

Not very friendly. My instinct was to give him a lesson in manners. But the quieter, colder voice of policy whispered it was better to avoid hasty action, when I didn't yet know the rules.

"That's right," boomed a voice at my elbow. "No sense giving the Governor's Inquisitors extra work your first day here."

I looked up, at a man nearly the size of Ungus.

"Who's the Governor?" I asked, in the mildest tone likely to be heard in that room.

The big man shrugged and smiled. "*That*'ll never get you out of the Vaults," he answered cryptically. "Everybody knows it. Governor Gwys."

Then he stared at my sudden laughter. Was it possible, I wondered, that on my first day here I already knew a secret about His Excellency the Governor of Shard?

"What's so funny?" the big man asked.

I gave him a friendly smile. "Why should I tell you?" Then it was my turn to melt away into the crowd, and his turn to stand staring after me.

"What was that all about?" asked Jacob, when we'd gone far enough for the crowd noise to cover our voices.

I looked at him thoughtfully. "Maybe I'll tell you sometime." It had just occurred to me: if Gwys was an exile from the Courts of Chaos, and I was, why not others? My travelling companions, for example... I already had the impression, just from being around them, that they (like myself) were more real than the average Joe Shadow...

I jerked my head toward the woman called Angelica. Jacob nodded, and we continued edging through the crowd toward her. I took the chance, when Jacob wasn't looking at me, to examine him on a level deeper than what usually passes for sight.

Jacob's mind was marked with an outlaw's brand!

Excitedly, I picked out my remaining companions and scrutinized them one by one. They were all branded men too! Six of us together? "The Lords play so many tricks with Fate that Fate sometimes can't resist a trick in turn." Whose was the voice I heard in my mind, saying those words?

But now I knew a secret about each of my companions, that they might not know themselves. I could even tell them apart through the press of the crowd, by the small differences that made each brand unique.

It occurred to me then that I might be, in Shardian terms, a wealthy man. The thought was like a slap of cold water, even in that hot room... the jump from ownership to theft being a short one. Suddenly I understood why everyone on the streets looked so wary and so hard. Each of them was saying to the others without words, "Pass on, friend. There are lots cheaper secrets in this town than mine."

I had scrutinized almost everyone in the room, without finding any more brands, when Angelica suddenly stood up and waved for attention. The room went still around her. Many of those present had apparently been waiting for this very thing.

"I went into the Vaults today," she announced, in a clear-ringing voice that suited her sunlight style of beauty. "I walked and I walked. I followed the light, till I almost thought I'd never catch up with it. But then, just when my strength felt ready to fail, I caught it. I have the Lay of Broca the Elder!"

She raised her arms, so full of triumph that she looked like a statue of Victory carved in ivory and gold. With very little idea what she was talking about, I found myself joining in the general cheer.

Then Angelica began to sing.

We were all quiet, instantly. Any who were fools enough or tone-deaf enough to make noise were hushed by their neighbors. In one case, I noticed that a barmaid broke a pot over the head of a talkative drunk. His friends made no move to resent it: they were listening, too.

Yes, it was that good. We all stood there for more than an hour, and I'd bet my own money there wasn't a secret traded or a pocket picked in all that crowded room. And when it was over we shouted ourselves hoarse, and threw money on the table till the toes of Angelica's boots were buried in coins.

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Then Angelica began to sing.

We were all quiet, instantly. Any who were fools enough or tone-deaf enough to make noise were hushed by their neighbors. In one case, I noticed that a barmaid broke a pot over the head of a talkative drunk. His friends made no move to resent it: they were listening, too.

Yes, it was that good. We all stood there for more than an hour, and I'd bet my own money there wasn't a secret traded or a pocket picked in all that crowded room. And when it was over we shouted ourselves hoarse, and threw money on the table till the toes of Angelica's boots were buried in coins.

She bowed gracefully to the room at large, and began shoveling the money into a sack. She was clever: many would pay to hear that song again. (I would myself.) Others, who hadn't been here, would listen to people rave about it and be willing to pay even more. The Lay of Broca the Elder was too long to be easily memorized by a listener... and if anyone did manage it, everyone would know he'd taken Angelica's song.

"What did you mean about following the light?" asked Barak.

Angelica looked sidelong at him, still scooping up coins. "You're new in Shard, aren't you? Why should I tell you this? What will you offer?"

Barak smiled. "You aren't the only one who knows some things."

Angelica gave her sun-bright smile, as the last of the coins clicked into her bag.

"Come upstairs with me," she invited, "and we'll talk."

They came down again, after about ten minutes. I'd been nursing a beer near the foot of the stairs, resigned to a long wait. Ye gods and powers: to go upstairs with a woman like that, and come down again in only ten minutes? Talk about being too goal-directed!

"Good night," I said to her, in the tone of a greeting.

"Good night," she answered. "Who are you?"

"Darien," I told her. "I want to know about the Vaults."

"And you will pay...?"

"The usual," I assured her. "Could we speak in private?"

She nodded, and led the way upstairs.

The room was neat and simple, not frilly, and very clean. In general, Shard was a clean city: everything has its good points, even endless rain.

Angelica sat on the bed, leaving me the chair. There was nothing at all suggestive about her manner in doing this. I had the impression it had more to do with the bed being the best seat to keep an eye on the door and the window.

"So, you've been down into the Vaults," I opened.

"Yes, many times," she said. "I go down there when there are things that I need."

"Secrets."

She nodded. "Secrets. Lost knowledge. But, you want knowledge from me, Darien. What do you have to trade?"

I hesitated. "Knowledge for knowledge. But will you tell me, first, what sort of knowledge you would most value?"

Angelica made a little palm-up gesture, as if catching something and throwing it back to me. "Ah, but what determines the value of a secret is its importance to you, personally. Then, its value is diluted by the number of people who know it. What do you want from the Vaults?"

"Mmm. That in itself is secret information, which I have confided to no one. Will you credit it to my account?"

"I will, according to its value."

"And you will then be free to tell it to others?"

Angelica shrugged, with a wry smile. "When it ceases to be a secret, you will know. One always knows." She shook her head. "I will tell you nothing further for free. What do you want from the Vaults?"

I scowled down at the floor. "I want to know who I am."

She laughed, but the sound was harsh, unlike her normal laughter. "No, you don't," she answered grimly. "Many think they want to know the whole truth about themselves. But very few minds can contain that knowledge. Do you want to wander the Vaults insane, until you die or someone kills you?"

I snorted. "Obviously not. Very well, then... say rather that I want to remember my past, the knowledge of which has been wiped from my brain."

She relaxed a little. "Still dangerous, perhaps, but a much wiser goal."

I found myself leaning forward slightly in my chair. "Then, you think the Vaults can in fact restore my memory?"

"Oh, yes. It will be a deep run... deeper than I personally like to go. But the Vaults can do this for you."

"Then, how do I find these Vaults?"

She glanced at the rain-streaked window. "You don't. You must wander the streets of Shard until the Vaults find you. Sooner or later it always happens. You will simply... find yourself in the Vaults."

"How will I know? What are they like?"

"Like an endless maze of black stone corridors. Then you must walk, and think of the knowledge you want. A light will appear. Follow it, no matter how far... and in your case, you will probably have to go deep into the maze. But when—and

if—you finally stand within that light, the knowledge you seek will fill you.”

“All right.” My excitement at this revelation was intense. I could get my memory back!

“Do you feel that you’ve had good value for your secret, Darien?”

Something in her tone pulled me up short.

“I must admit that I do. I gather there’s more I need to know?”

Angelica smiled, this time neither sweet nor sour, but simply very businesslike. “I have not yet told you how to get out of the Vaults.”

I had to laugh. “Without which all the rest, although so valuable, is useless. Well played, Angelica.” I paused a moment, considering matters and probabilities, and human nature. “Very well. In a city named Azhrall, I had as my mistress a dancer named Suzette. One night I entered her mind with my own, and made her fall in love with me.” I found that I was frowning. “Unfortunately, in the process I found she already loved me of her own free will. She had simply been too proud, too uncertain of my feelings for her, to tell me so. But, once I had forced her to love me, she could never again love me of her own free will.”

I stopped, reminding myself sternly that it was far better to make this personal revelation than to explain my method for penetrating a computer bank, or some other secret of tactical or strategic importance. Besides, people enjoy secrets about sex, and I felt that Angelica would be no exception. (And yes, I am aware that I become analytical and defensive when I’m embarrassed, and what’s it to you?)

Sure enough, Angelica’s eyes grew wide with pleasure. “Oh, that’s a *good* secret,” she breathed. “All right, then. To get out of the Vaults, you have to tell the Vaults a secret. And that is the single most important fact to remember when you’re trading secrets in Shard. Sooner or later, any secret that you trade will be used by someone to get out of the Vaults after a run. And when that happens, the value of that secret drops to zero. It can never be used for that purpose again, and thus it is no true secret by the standards of Shard. So, the single most important rule of survival is this: *never give away your last secret*. Because you may find yourself in the Vaults at any time, without warning, whether you go to seek them or not.

And if you ever find yourself in the Vaults without a secret, you will die."

I nodded, my mind busily fitting pieces together. "Then, this is why people steal the secrets of others."

"That's right. And a small secret won't do for the Vaults. The place where you left your hat is no good... unless, of course, you left it in a treasure room you went to plunder, or beside the bed where you lay with your best friend's wife."

"I see. Yes, indeed I see. Is there anything further I need to know?"

Angelica shrugged. "The usual. Don't cross Governor Gwys. Beware his Inquisitors if you plan to commit robbery or murder or assault, and especially if you steal secrets. Aside from those things, there's little law in Shard. Vacant buildings belong to no one, so live where you please. Beware your companions... and yet know that you are never safe alone."

I smiled wryly. "As you say, the usual. Most of those have been my rules of life as long as I can remember, and probably much longer. Having the Vaults to deal with, I take it that the citizens of Shard find little need to further complicate their lives?"

"That is very true. You are a perceptive man."

"I like to know how things work. Would you say that things are now even between us?"

"I would say so, yes. And you?"

"I agree. Then, please allow me to tell you that I find you very attractive. Would you care to have with me a transaction neither financial nor secretive?"

She showed me yet another quality of smile. "I believe I'd like that, yes."

Suddenly, the bed on which she was seated was more than just a place to sit. She moved to make room for me.

She was very lovely. And I had just decided to go down into the Vaults as soon as possible, which meant I might be about to die. So I'm sure the experience would have been memorable, even without the extra enjoyment of imagining Jacob's face, as he waited in the bar and wondered what the hell I was up to for so long.

Sure enough, when we came down the stairs a couple of hours later, Jacob practically pounced on me.

"Where have you been all this time?"

Unfortunately, I completely spoiled the joke at that point, by laughing so hard that he immediately guessed the truth. Chalk it up to an unusual degree of mellowness on my part.

Jacob snorted. I was sure he was remembering my statement when we talked about going into the bar, that what we needed was not to party.

Then he looked up at Angelica—who was standing on the stairs behind me, fortunately looking quite amused by the whole business—and he said, with a manner worthy of a courtier, "My Lady, if you could spare me a moment on a matter of business?"

She played up to him, holding out her hand like a queen. "But of course."

How long did Jacob and Angelica stay upstairs together?

Ha! Why should I tell you?

Shortly after Jacob's return downstairs, he and I went out for a little house-hunting. The rainy streets, with their few and furtive passers-by, seemed better for private conversation than the bar.

"I want to get some rest," I told him. "And then I intend to buy as much food and water as I can easily carry, and go in search of the Vaults. I'd like you with me. Will you come?"

Jacob's frowned and looked puzzled. "Do you really think that's wise? From what I was told, we ought to take steps to learn some more secrets first."

I could only frown back at him, and shake my head. "I was told it only takes one secret to escape from the Vaults after a run. Have you learned something that changes that picture?"

"Not exactly. Just that the more secrets you have, the more you can seek."

I wasn't about to get into how many secrets each of us had, so I just nodded. "I suppose that's true enough. But the longer we hang around in Shard, the more chances for something to go wrong. I'd go right now, if not for the fact that the Vaults seem to be something of an endurance test, and I want to be as fresh as possible. As for you... well, Jacob, you're a free agent. You'll have to make up your own mind. I want you with me, and probably the others as well. But with or without any of you, I'm going into the Vaults tomorrow."

We'd walked a couple of blocks by then. All the houses in the streets near the bar seemed to be taken. We covered another block in silence, before Jacob spoke again.

"All right," he said. "Then I'm going with you."

We found a house, with its own courtyard and a room for each of our companions. Basic black, of course—not very homey. (Could Shard have originally been created as a hell-Shadow for interior decorators?)

We went back to the bar, and told the others about the house. Ungus and Zardash came back with us, but Barak and Neslund stayed out for awhile on business of their own.

Zardash volunteered to keep watch. We offered to relieve him, but he said he didn't need to sleep. Apparently, he planned to spend the night lurking on the roof regardless of what we did. So I wedged the door of my room shut and got some sleep, and I believe the others did the same.

The screams woke me. Screams of mortal agony are distinctive, hard to fake, and will cut through almost any slumber.

I had chosen my room partly because it had no windows. So I opened the door and snuck a look. Nothing in the hallway but Ungus, already moving toward the window at the head of the stairs. So I went that way, too.

The screams suddenly cut off, with a gurgle and some wheezing. Then silence, except for the slight patter of the drizzling rain outside.

Ungus and I crouched by the window and had a look. The eternal dim twilight of Shard was enough to let us see a worm-like creature, eating the corpse of a man in the courtyard. The front end of the worm was one big mouth, lined all around with jagged, blood-stained teeth. It had already eaten the corpse's head and arms, and was working its way down the torso.

Behind me, doors were opening along the hallway. The others were coming to see what was going on. But I barely spared a glance to make sure it was them. The important thing right now was the worm.

I scanned it, on a psychic level, and saw that it bore the mental brand of an outlaw from Chaos. Zardash's brand, to be

precise.

I cursed Zardash in the language of the Ssreesti. The others probably thought it was merely a hiss of annoyance. (Not that it was much of a curse... just a wish that hordes of tiny green caterpillars would come and infest his shorts. Why did he have to pull this bullshit now, and cut short my last night's sleep before hitting the Vaults?)

"Let's get out of here," I said to the others, who by now were all gathered around, watching the worm at its messy meal. "Let's go and hunt for the Vaults. Now."

Neslund did a double-take. "But, what about Zardash? That thing—"

"That thing is Zardash," I snapped. "And he's not invited. He makes a kill in our own courtyard, he lets the guy scream first...I don't want him. Do any of you?"

I looked around at them. But nobody spoke up for Zardash.

"How do you know that's him?" asked Ungus. Good old Ungus: straight to the point, and no distractions.

I shrugged. I'd had to tell them it was Zardash, or they might not have wanted to leave him. But I wasn't about to tell them how I knew. "I just know. If you think I'm bullshitting, you're welcome to stay and look for Zardash. But I for one am leaving before the Inquisitors show up. How about you guys?"

That helped them make up their minds in a hurry. No one likes cop trouble in a strange town. Within five seconds, they were heading for their rooms to grab their stuff. I did likewise.

In less than a minute, we were out of there. And thus ended my first brief foray into Shardian home ownership.

We bought food and water, and wandered around Shard... a gloomy and rather tense pastime. (Walk-in-the-rain junkies, if you want to be cured, go spend a month in Shard. You may survive, if you're tough and smart and lucky, but I guarantee your addiction will not.)

They hit us suddenly, out of doorways and the mouth of an alley. I was engaged by two men with swords, almost before I knew we were in a fight.

I managed to kill one of them in the first few seconds. The other was a better swordsman: he nearly got me while I was skewering his partner.

As we settled down to fence, I noticed the others were

engaged with opponents of their own... all except Ungus, who was busily bugging out.

Huh! So much for Ungus making a good ally! Not that we'd sworn eternal fidelity or anything... but what's the use of a traveling companion who makes himself scarce at the start of the first fight?

Of course, if we all got killed, Ungus would prove once again to be the smart one...

My opponent was good enough that I actually wasn't sure I could take him. In my experience, this was rare. I went on the defensive, and checked him for a mental brand, but no. Whoever he was, it was a pleasure to cross blades with him. But this bout was not for pleasure, so it was time for a bit of trickery.

I did a quick-change on myself, so my left forearm was suddenly covered with armor plate. It didn't show, because of the sleeve of my shirt. My opponent was startled as hell, when I blocked his sword with my "bare" arm. I leaped on him, as his weapon was carried offline, and we went down together with me on top. That stunned him for a second. I didn't give him a chance to recover: I bashed him on the side of the head with my sword-hilt.

I felt his skull give way, and he went limp as a sack of bake-roots. I crossed him off my list of problems, and jumped up to see how the others were doing. They were just finishing off their last opponents. It seemed Ungus had indeed left the party too soon.

Maybe much too soon. All of a sudden, I noticed it wasn't raining. The walls and floor were dull black, instead of shiny. There was a roof....

"Oh shit. We're in the *Vaults*."

I wasn't sure whose voice had said those words...maybe even mine. I was staring around at the dark walls. The home of all lost secrets...the place where all questions had answers. My mind filled with questions, the way a hungry man's mouth fills with water at the smell of food. Was Oberon of Amber really dead? Why did some people grow old and die, while others stayed young forever? What was at the bottom of the Pit?

I pulled myself back, as if from the edge of a high cliff. The secrets of the universe... but dammit, hadn't I come to recover my past? Wasn't that secret enough to start with?

Yes... yes, if only because it seemed a lot wiser to begin with

something limited. I'd lived with my past once already, or I wouldn't be there to ask. Whereas the bottom of the Pit was most likely to be infinity, or else Primal Chaos. Full comprehension of either of those things would probably break my mind like a dry twig.

Besides, now that I was in the Vaults, I could feel that I was in danger. It didn't feel like another mind attacking mine... it was more like a tide, running out and trying to carry me with it... dark, wordless, completely implacable... the undertow of the soul...

The Vaults were trying to suck the secrets out of my mind, was what it amounted to.

I could resist, of course. I'd already been resisting, before my conscious mind had even noticed the danger. Any mind would resist, instinctively. And any mind could resist... for a while.

But suddenly, in a deep and wordless knowledge, I knew that food and water were not the limits of my time in the Vaults.

One of the enemy, although badly wounded, lived long enough for Jacob to rifle through his mind.

"Interesting," Jacob commented. "His name is Derek, but he doesn't know the name of his master. There's just a shape of darkness in his mind. This Dark One caught him, tortured him until he told all his secrets, and then sent him out with a party of others in the same plight. They were supposed to catch more victims—especially newcomers to Shard—and bring them back."

I frowned, waving my sword at the man I'd bashed. "Their tactics weren't very well suited to their purpose. And yet, this one was a pretty good fighter."

Jacob shrugged, his mouth twisting as if he'd tasted something bitter. "How well would you fight, for someone who'd done that to you?"

"I wouldn't," I answered promptly. "Neither would you. The first time he took his eyes off us, he'd simply never see us again."

Jacob shook his head. "Not that simple. He did something to them... some kind of psychic or magical domination, I think.

They really had no choice."

I went to the man I'd bashed. There was no more anger in my mind, only sadness... and underneath, the strange, pulsing excitement of being in the Vaults. I still had my sword in my hand....

"Wait!" cried Jacob, seeing what I was about to do. "Let me try his mind."

"Be my guest. But I think his brains are kind of scrambled." I stepped back, letting Jacob kneel next to our sometime foe.

After a brief effort, Jacob looked up at me. "I think his name is Dak. Everything's kind of blurred...like it was all written on a blackboard, and somebody halfway rubbed it out. Listen, I can't heal him, but it's just possible he might recover on his own. What if we left him here?"

I could only shake my head. "I was going to do just that, before you told us about the Dark One. I've got nothing against this guy, really. But, he's a secretless man in the Vaults. Do you feel something sucking at your mind, Jacob? Are you willing to give Dak one of your secrets, to keep him alive and sane?"

Jacob just stared at me for a second. His eyes were wide and dark. He felt the pull, all right. Then he looked away. His benevolence didn't quite extend to a secret.

I sighed. "I would have given him his chance. But now he's got no chance. Without a secret, the best he could hope for is to wander the Vaults, either insane or just plain desperate. Do you want to run into him in that condition? Maybe have him take you by surprise?"

Jacob's mouth was twisted in angry frustration. He almost seemed about to speak. But then, without a word, he got to his feet and stepped backward.

Barak and Neslund didn't say anything, either. Well, there didn't really seem to be much to say.

I looked at Dak's face, wondering what kind of man he was, and why he'd come to Shard. He felt real... not as real as I was, but in other circumstances I suspected he would have been worth knowing, and it was a damn shame.

I could probably have healed him with my shape-shift. And I might have planted a secret in his mind (if the Vaults didn't just suck up the secret when I tried to pass it). But, had the Dark One left enough of a man in that body to make an ally? And those secrets were my life. Hell, it wasn't as if I owed him

anything...

I ran him through. Yes, I felt kind of bad about it. But what difference did that make, really? I can't believe it would've made any difference to him.

Jacob finished off the other wounded man, and we left the place in silence.

The others vanished one by one, never when I was looking. Too late, it occurred to me that we might have made a place to meet, afterward.

Maybe better we hadn't. Who knew who we might be then? Suppose they'd all been my enemies in the Courts of Chaos?

People always seem to drift away from me (not counting the ones that I myself propel more forcefully). Was I always like that?

'Who the hell do you think you are, anyway?'

A woman's voice, in my head, tag-end of a long-gone quarrel. But the question was a good one. Despite Angelica's warning, I was seriously tempted to put it just that way...

No.

I want to remember my past.

The walls were matte-black, not shiny. I couldn't tell where the light was coming from. No shadows, just light...in the air, as it were. Was it still glowing inside my lungs? If I made my flesh transparent, would my blood shine dim as good intentions?

Some other time.

I want to remember my past.

When I found out what I'd done to be outlawed, would guilt crush me?

I laughed at myself. Guilt? Me? What guilt could possibly crush—

Don't ask that question, in this place!

I want to remember my past.

There was the light!

I ran after it. Not a full-out run, but a long-term, traveller's pace. I could run like that for a long time... and I would, if that was what it took.



And it did. And I did. I'd almost like to say I ran for days, but that term is even more meaningless in the Vaults than on the streets of Shard. Besides, the Vaults' sucking at my mind got worse and worse, very slowly but steadily. I don't think I could have survived that for days.

But I caught the light.

And when the light shone on me, I... saw.

I saw through the eyes of my own past self. He... I... was walking down an alley. I came to a door, and used a stolen key. I made my way inside, to a certain office. In a file there, I found what I was hunting.

Afterward, there was a new Lord of House Valeric... and another satisfied client for me!

I sat down on the floor of the Vaults, and laughed until the tears came. How many (of those having some claim to sanity) had done this in the Vaults?

But I was a spy! A professional thief of secrets! Without knowing who I was, I had recreated myself... had bettered myself in my craft during my exile. The trick of crawling into a computer was something I hadn't known before.

And Shard. How many spies would sell their souls (assuming they hadn't parted with them long ago, much more cheaply) to find such a place? And here I was! It was almost as though, in discovering Shard, I had reached the place which had always been my homeland. Maybe I should find whoever had arranged my exile, and thank them!

Somehow, though, I doubted this would be my course. And what were the circumstances of my exile, anyway? Shouldn't I be able to remember now?

Like some small rodent with a stash of hard-earned nuts, I began sorting newfound memories. A place of twisted rocks where I'd played as a child, leading other children in children's games. My mother's face. My bedroom. My arms instructor. The first time I had sex.

But, yes, there were still gaps. Maybe it made sense, that a life isn't like the Lay of Broca the Elder, to be grabbed in one gulp. Can you hold your life in your mind at one time?

And the Vaults' mental pressure was getting very bad. It wasn't so much that I was tired. But this pressure... it was time to tell the Vaults a secret, before they broke in and took what they wanted.

So I told the Vaults about Suzette. With luck, Angelica hadn't had time to use that one yet. And sure enough, as the words left my lips, the pressure began to lift from my mind.

It was strange, to feel the secretness leave the story as I told it. It meant as much (and as little) to me as ever, and there was no reason to think everybody in world suddenly knew it. But its *secretness* was gone. That was as clearly as I could formulate it, even to myself.

I was saddened. When I finished the story of Suzette, no doubt I would find myself on the streets of Shard...there to wander, alone and more than somewhat vulnerable. I would rest when and where I could. I would walk until I found the Vaults again, however long it took.

Dammit, I didn't want to leave! Couldn't I just tell the Vaults a secret, and remain there?

As my mouth finished its sordid little tale of love mistaken and betrayed, I fixed my mind on that intention: to relieve the pressure, and to remain.

And there I was, the pressure gone, still in the maze of secrets!

I sat down, and ate some food. Maybe next time I'd better walk, not run. This was going to take awhile, and though I might stop to eat, sleeping here didn't appeal to me.

Well... not strictly true. The dreams I might have in this place...! But it was better to remain in control.

It took me four runs, one after the other, to recover all my past. And each time the pressure built, to the point where I had to tell another secret. Besides Suzette, I parted with the details of how I robbed an armored car, shortly after I came to Azhrall. I also told the Vaults about the murder Zardash had committed in our courtyard. And I told how Zardash was an outlaw from the Courts of Chaos.

What an interesting life I'd had! I'd been outlawed for the usual reason: I'd gotten caught. My father was an asshole, but he had good connections. My mother I had loved, but she was dead. I held a secret membership in a certain great House. I knew how to put my hands on my old Trump deck, which had some rather peculiar contents. I even found a sealed-off year of time, that had been gone from my memory before I had been

outlawed... and whose contents cost me an extra secret (Ungus' outlaw status) to recover.

After five consecutive runs, even I was getting tired. I decided to cut things short. So I traded the secret that Barak was an outlaw for the technique of applying and removing an outlaw's brand. (Maybe I'd let him take advantage of the service... he'd probably be more than satisfied with the trade.) And I traded Neslund's outlaw status for intelligence about the Dark One.

Then I left the Vaults, sneaked into an empty house, barricaded myself in a room, and collapsed.

My mind was swimming with plans. But I had to sleep sometime.

And there would be a world to conquer when I woke.

Blood & Shadow

Tales from the journal of Roland, Child of Amber

by John J. Wick

It had taken weeks, but I finally managed to track down the Frenchman. He was hiding out in that hotel in Madrid. It didn't take long to get the information I needed from him. He was squeamish about needles.

Once I knew the right place, I took a quick flight to upstate New York. The shadows were easy to bend, as they always are in Florimel's Earth, and the flight only took a couple of minutes. It had been a long time since I'd been on Earth and I had forgotten just how much I liked it there. The air is always sweet and rich, not just an afterthought. New York City brought so many memories to mind; Jenny in particular. But there was business to take care of first.

I got a cab. It was small and smelly, but it got me to the brown brick building the Frenchman spoke of just before I began working on his eyes. I stepped out, tipped the cabby (a friendly guy named Harry) and looked the building up and down.

A stroll around the perimeter confirmed my estimates. One door. Windows all boarded up. Not a lot of room for a strategic retreat. I shrugged and walked up to the door, setting my finger on the lock. I whispered the word and a small string of fire ran along my finger into the door and the lock popped. Easy enough.

Raising my left hand, letting the lynchpins fall from my fingers, five little flames flowed from me into the darkness of the building. They returned in moments. No, there was nothing traceable. No alarms, mundane or magical. At least, none that I could figure out. I stepped into the darkness and began searching. Another lynchpin set my eyes to flame and the darkness was no longer a hindrance. I walked through the building until I found the crates I was looking for. I scanned the names painted in block black letters.

Carl Corey

Very clever, uncle. I almost didn't recognize you.

The wood cracked under my grip and I pulled away the hay inside. Something metal glinted in my firesight. I reached down, pulled, but it just wouldn't give. Another tug and it came into view.

A carousel horse's head looked up from the box back at me.

Damn.

I couldn't believe it. I'd checked everything. *Everything.*

Wait a minute—

I ran my hand along the top of the silver pole. Yes, there was a screw cap. I turned it in my hands, lifted off the top and reached deep inside... pulling a handful of rifle rounds from the hole.

Yes.

Then, the ring of ricochet. I spun about, seeing the men running toward me with guns blasting. I pushed back off the crates, landing hard on my shoulder just as a round flashed by my temple. No time! My left arm was numb, fingers fumbling. I slipped into the shadows and waited. Waited for one to move close enough. Closer. Closer...

I moved fast, faster than anything he'd ever seen before. His neck was broken and his gun was in my hands before he hit the floor. No strong shadowstuff here. Earth has always been soft.

Three more went down before they even saw me. The other seven suddenly got smart and started backing out, their guns firing at any shadow that moved. I made sure there were plenty of empty shadows for their fire.

But then one of them threw a switch on the east wall. Seconds began counting down.

Ten.

No time for Trumps.

Nine.

I looked back at the crates full of horses.

Eight.

Tried to pry the silver pole loose.

Seven.

I heard the door slam shut.

Six.

All windows boarded up. Barred from the inside.

Five.

I sank deep inside, hoping I wouldn't stumble over the lynchpins.

Four.

My body ignited. Hot.

Three.

Hotter.

Two.

I was a star.

One.

Melted right through the roof.

Zero.

Hoped I'd be far enough away. Damn.

Just as the spell went off, the building followed. Hot brick flew by me, reaching up, but falling while I soared higher. Pain? Nah, the spell doesn't work like that. But it was going to be hell to get back down.

Well, I did get down, but it was across the country in L.A. I landed on a rooftop and took a few jumps across the buildings, took some stairs down and took a cab across town. The cabby didn't appreciate the smoke, but I gave him a big bill and he was happy. I went up to the apartment, stripped off my smoldering clothes and took my tired self to the shower.

A while later, I was washed, but clean and renewed as I felt, I still could not get over how stupid I was back at the warehouse. I panicked. Like an amateur.

Damn.

I wiped away the steam from the mirror and dark green eyes stared back at me, along with hair as black as a moonless Arden night. I shook my head, walked back into my bedroom and picked up my Trumps. I shuffled through them; then I put the Trump aside, got myself dressed and filled up my shoulder-satchel. I picked up the Trump again and I stared. The card was slick under my fingers and as the cool wind passed through me, I saw green eyes and red hair and soft lips.

"Little nephew. How kind of you to call."

Her voice. By the Unicorn, I swear I hope she can't read my mind when she speaks to me. "Carl" got into enough trouble for thoughts like that. "Greetings to you, my Aunt. Mind if I step through?"

"Be welcome." She extended her hand, and I felt her warm skin under mine. Then, I was there next to her. Her eyes and her hair and her skin. All of her.

What she was wearing—well, I guess she must have been expecting company. Intimate company. The silks fell in just the right places. She moved away from me and the silver of the moon fell down between the folds of her dress.

Boys, you can keep Florimel.

"What did you do to your hair?" she asked, running her hand through it.

"Just wanted to try it out."

"It makes you look like Caine."

I smiled. "You were never very fond of that side of the family."

"Oh, I don't know. Arden can be lovely at midnight."

Black as an Arden midnight, I thought, and passed it off as coincidence.

"And what is it you needed of me this evening, nephew?" As she spoke, she poured a dark wine into two crystal glasses. "I hope it isn't anything too demanding." She walked toward me, putting the glass in my hand. "You know how easily I..."

I didn't let her finish. "Fiona, I came here to ask a favor."

"A favor?" She leaned back into the pillows of the couch. "What did you have in mind?"

I took a sip of my wine. *She'll never go for it*, I thought. *Got to make it good. Use her rules.* I sucked down the rest of the wine and slid onto the couch next to her. "All right, Auntie. Here it is—" I paused, and she leaned a little forward.

"I'm ready," she said.

"So am I."

Her smile slipped sideways. "Are you?"

"Yes."

She took a deep breath, and I watched the curves of the dress just out of the corner of my eye. "You can't *think*; you have to *know*."

"I know it."

"So why do you need me?"

I slid a little closer, my voice lowering just a touch. "I need you—to guide me."

A low laugh, like winter wind. "What about your father?"

"I don't want my father. I. Want. You." There were never any truer words spoken. She was so close. No woman had ever gotten so close to me without my lips finding hers. She kept looking into my eyes; I tried to shield her, but I knew she could sidestep any skills I had learned. After all, she was the one who taught them to me.

"If I do this..." she whispered, so close I could feel her breath on my lips. "If I do this..."

I was playing her game. The way she always played it with me. I

could feel her breath, heavy in her chest. I chanced a look into her green eyes and spoke; so close now that I swear our lips touched. "If I do this, I will be yours..." my voice trembled, "completely."

I heard the slightest sound escape her then. After all those years of being so close to her, now I was closer than ever before. I thought it was going to happen. But then—reflexively, I think—I pushed her. It was the smallest, most delicate push I ever used. I didn't even know if she would feel it, with all of her defenses.

"You are already mine, nephew."

She stood, her voice flat again, neutral. "Be in Amber in a week. I will show you what you need to know." She draped her gown around her body and walked away. "You know the way out, I believe?" I nodded and pulled out my Trumps. I noticed my hands were shaking.

"Oh, and Roland...?"

I looked up. The moon was behind her and her eyes were full of its silver; but her smile was full of snakes. "If you hadn't pushed, you wouldn't be going anywhere right now."

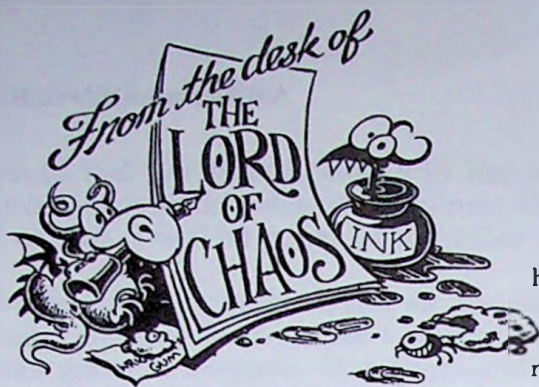
I nearly dropped the Trump.

"Sweet dreams."

Dance

Any minute now
the words will replay themselves
within the mind's ear:
The clown and the singer
fail at last,
 juggler of hearts
and crier at the sticking place
falter,
 footing lost, voice broken,
embracing in the downward spinning,
and clown take up the cry,
falling caller
catch the dark staccato
laughter, netless
in the minute's eye

Roger Zelazny



Eugene and I remained hidden while the dark-haired youngster ambled past and turned up the pathway to a neighboring house.

Arriving at the porch, the little tyke paused; he looked both ways down the silent street, ascended the steps in a leisurely manner, and paused to stare at the door with a look of grim determination on his face. He filled his lungs with a heaping helping of the early morning air, tipped his head back, and began to holler a name in a drawn-out yell.

"To-o-o-n-ee-ee!"

After emptying his lungs, he inhaled again and began to repeat the name.

"Tony... Tony... Tony..."

Slowly at first, he speeded up into a rapid chant.

"Tony. TonyTonyTonyTony..."

On subsequent breaths he yodeled, yelled, warbled, and howled; he placed emphasis on different syllables. He added vibrato. He sang the scales while vocalizing the name. He continued with a persistence that is rarely seen past the juvenile years while adding enough coloratura to make an operatic diva envious, and, throughout this display, he seemed to be oblivious to the disapproving looks being cast through the windows of the adjacent homes.

A couple of loud thumps and a muffled stream of invective coming from inside the residence he faced were almost drowned out by the youth's continual barrage of sound.

The front door opened and a tow-headed boy came out onto the porch. The blond youth turned to the other and began making shushing gestures.

"Billy, my dad sent me out here to tell you that you better, 'cut it out.'"

"Yeah, but he sent you out."

"Yeah."

"Yeah. Wanna' go play catch?"

Tony looked over his shoulder at the house, "yeah, let's get out of here."

The two scurried down the street.

Throughout this display I was on a nearby roof in the form of a television antenna, and Eugene was a robin perched atop me. I made sure that no one was watching and slid to the ground in the guise of a suited human while Eugene, knowing the drill, changed into a copy of the *Watchtower*; it was a pretty safe bet that nobody would bother us.

While I try to avoid being pedantic, I found myself once again assuming the role of Eugene's teacher.

"As I was saying before, children often seem to have an innate understanding of the most basic principles of magic. Take the summoning ritual that we just witnessed as an example—Billy knew the name of the creature to be summoned; he understood the value of repetition and a rhythmic cadence; and, once he began, he knew to pursue his task with a single-minded devotion until it was complete.

"Knowing the name of the creature is one of the most important elements of summoning. That's one of the primary reasons that most sorcerers are so reluctant to reveal their true names; in this line of work, a *nom de guerre* is *de rigueur*." I could feel Eugene chuckling at my little *bon mot*. "For the most simple form of summoning, Invocation by Annoyance, repeated recitation is a must," I continued, "but for the more elegant forms, incantation, as in humor, The Rule of Three is more commonplace. A musical component is helpful, for as they say, 'music hath charms to sooth the savage beast,' and you should please bear in mind that the subject of your spell is usually not too pleased to be the object of your attention."

"Now, nobody here practices anything like High Compelling, but for a much more harsh and insidious form of summoning, let's go see what they call a *Notification of Audit*."



